

Good Morning,

I hope everyone is staying warm and cozy as we ride out our big storm.

I'm happy that zoom allow us to still gather and celebrate.

As I've mentioned in prior sermons, I like to tackle the lessons and gospel in their totality.

The thread I hear in the lessons today speak to the joy and light of living in the kingdom.

That thread is then instructed in the gospel with what you have to do to get there.

I'm going to focus on that instruction today and the choice it presents — react in fear or act in faith.

*As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.*

*Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.*

<pause>

While the call to follow is simple on its face, when we dig in, I find its implications both profound and scary.

A call to walk away from your life and follow Jesus

Let's explore the implications of that for a second. What exactly does that mean?

Walking away from your job?

Walking away from your family?

Walking away from your life as you've put it together?

<pause>

I would call that a radical proposition especially at odds with our commonly accepted notions of obligation to family and it's overlay with Christian virtue.

The principal driver of that scariness is it's unqualified and unstipulated nature

There is no follow me 'if' or 'after'

No room for mitigating rationalizations

It's straightforward. Answer it and find the kingdom

But moreover, the unqualified and unstipulated nature is almost as profound as the call itself.

Is there any circumstance where you would take such a step without the thousands of things we think about and consider when confronted with a great decision.

We've been trained and conditioned to do just that.

Could we respond to that call today or is too scary.

But part of me can't help but feel that there is a simplicity making it more doable by closing the road of deliberation and rationalization that often leads to indecision and inaction.

Maybe the only way to close those roads is to step with both feet into faith. That leaves me really scared but also exhilarated with the possibilities.

It harkens to the call to walk on water, the call to act in faith. React in fear or act in faith.

But I'll come back to that.

Along my spiritual journey, I've found myself evolving towards an epiphany of sorts, particularly drawn to the proposition proposed in Matthew 25,35-46.

*for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; 36 I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.' 37 Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? 38 When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? 39 Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' 40 And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.' 41 Then He will also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: 42 for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; 43 I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.' 44 Then they also will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?' 45 Then He will answer them, saying, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these,*

*you did not do it to Me.' 46 And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."*

<pause>

The prescription to the kingdom is right there in its call to service to others.

When I've reviewed my life experience, it was in those times of service where I've experienced unmitigated bliss, peace and happiness.

If that's the kingdom and I could have those feelings all the time, then that is good enough for me.

And for that reason, I'm now in the place where I interpret everything through the lens of that prescription — Matthew 25, 35-46

So, how does that connect with today's gospel?

Jesus put out the call to follow with a promise to the kingdom.

Seeing it through this lens we get specifics — what we have to do in that following and expectations on the payoff for living in the kingdom.

Let's take a talk about the payoff in the kingdom.

It's not an IOU. The payoff is right there when we follow. Not a layaway plan.

And as I said earlier, if the kingdom is the state of being you achieve by living in that following, it's good enough for me.

We experience the benefits and are in the kingdom as we make the choice to follow in the unqualified prescription outlined in Matthew 25.

There's also one more thing.

There's no criteria indicating which hungry we feed, which sick we care for, or what strangers we embrace.

That's scary as well because in our society in almost every aspect of that call we have overlayed criteria that determine who in need we will relieve. For reasons I would argue represent a collective reaction in fear.

So, let's try and explore the 'why' on the unqualified quality of Christ's choice to react in fear or act in faith.

Spoiler alert here, we're not going to find a definitive answer or explanation at the bottom of the rabbit hole I'm going to take you down.

Just maybe another way to work through that scary.

I've had discussions with more theologically educated folks than myself and they've suggested the ask may be more metaphoric. It's only a conundrum if you take it literally.

I concede that may be but indulge my thought exercise and entertain that Jesus meant it literally.

It would be so much easier if it was a little more compromising. Not so demanding and high risk.

Why would Jesus propose it in this way?

It's cliché but maybe it's as simple no risk no reward.

I'm not sure and that's more an observation than an explanation. But let's explore it a little.

When you approach a stranger and offer your hand, you've exercised a choice to act in faith and bear the risk of a negative interaction because the opportunities of a new relationship outweigh the risks.

Reacting in fear and walking by the stranger precludes any of the possibilities the new relationship might manifest.

<pause>

38 years ago, Johanna and I met in college. She an undergrad, me a new grad student.

We met at the college town's Episcopal church Christ Episcopal Church, Blacksburg VA, and one of our first dates was providing relief at a nearby flooded town.

It was her idea and she hounded me into it.

But it turned into one of many activities in service we did together as we stumbled into relationship.

But there was one event that I think connects with the unqualified choice discussion.

In collaboration with another denomination, we were working an OXFAM dinner fund raiser.

Some of you might be familiar, OXFAM is a Quaker founded organization that partners with NGOs around the world providing hunger relief.

In the middle of the event, our partner's leadership discovered that OXFAM did not screen the organizations it supported for communist affiliations.

The dinner was almost terminated before a compromise was reached and an additional donation basket was added to each table allowing doners to make a donation directly to our church partner's own relief efforts avoiding OXFAM.

Well, it saved the dinner but didn't save its success. Numbers of folks walked out at the disturbance.

And boy was the grace sucked out of the room. It felt like the event had drifted out of the kingdom.

Did it have that feeling because collectively we chose to react in fear rather than acting in faith.

Our efforts and rewards were diminished.

**<pause>**

I have one more case that I think fits here because it landed very close to home for us.

On New Year's Eve, I received news that one of my major contracts was being terminated taking half our income with it.

Now, as you might imagine, we were stricken with panic and almost paralyzed with the implication of financial uncertainty.

But coincidentally I was also preparing for this sermon and pondering reacting in fear over acting in faith.

Wow, we were facing such a choice right now. Do we hunker down, re-organize our lives, abandon areas of service and plans or can we act in faith and focus on the new opportunities this calamity may expose. We've chosen the latter and will see where God takes us.

Now, as serious as that was for us, I want to touch on one more thing relevant in this very scary time that reflects the true gravity and great scope this choice can take on.

In fact, I'd say it's the 800lb gorilla.

It's important to bear witness to Renée Good, and to Alex Pretti, and to the thousands of fellow Americans who have faced and are facing that scary choice to react in fear or act in faith.

In Minnesota and other places people are putting themselves at existential risk to protect their neighbors from assault, kidnapping and murder in the face of lawless immigration law enforcement.

That's very real. At any time, Maryland can be Minnesota, and that choice can be thrust in our face unexpectedly walking the dog or going to the grocery store.

**<pause>**

We should all pray for the strength as we are confronted with that choice to serve our neighbors and not react in fear but act in faith.

Amen