

## Claiming Our Identity: the New Community

Isaiah 9:1-4

Matthew 4:12-23

Bloomfield Presbyterian Church on the Green

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Jesus is off to a strong start in today's Gospel reading. He hadn't done much in earlier chapters to distinguish himself yet in the public eye, but one day in today's reading while walking along the beach he nets four disciples. All he does is call out to them and they quit their jobs, leave home, and follow.

Bear in mind that Jesus has done nothing, yet, to distinguish himself in the public eye. This story occurs quite early in the gospel. Chapter 4. Chapters 1 and 2 told the story of Jesus' birth, which was not a public event. Chapter 3 is all about John the Baptist, with just four verses at the end of the chapter describing Jesus being baptized. The first half of Chapter 4 is about Jesus being tempted in the wilderness, which was an intensely private experience away from people, crowds, onlookers.

That brings us right up to today's reading, Matthew 4:12-23. Jesus starts preaching. There's a verse on that. "From that time Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'" And with no further ado, he acquires four disciples.

The portrait Matthew is painting of Jesus emphasizes his authority. To get some disciples, all he has to do is say the word. He invites. They respond.

Notice what Jesus hasn't done yet. He hasn't done anything, yet, to earn the authority that he somehow has. He hasn't performed any miracles. He hasn't healed anybody. He hasn't delivered the Sermon on the Mount. He hasn't told off any hypocrites or blessed any children.

Nor can we attribute Jesus's authority to his social position in ancient Palestine. He doesn't come from a big name family. He isn't rich. His dad isn't politically connected. He didn't go to a prestigious academic institution of higher learning. He hasn't been auditioning for fame and fortune, hasn't been networking and planning his ascent into the religious and political limelight.

Jesus was born, baptized, tempted, and now he becomes the agent of his story. So far in this Gospel, things have happened *to him*; now he starts *making things happen*.

The spotlight is on Jesus's authority. He exercises his authority the way God does, just by speaking. "Follow me," he says, and it happens. He exercises his authority the way God always has from the beginning, just by speaking.

In the beginning, you remember, when God was creating [gesture] stuff, God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God's words always amount to something. The same is true for Jesus, from the beginning of his ministry. "Follow me," he said. And there were followers.

Today's sermon is the third in a three-week series about Christian identity. In an increasingly diverse religious landscape it helps to be clear about who we are, so that we can enter into respectful dialogue with those who believe differently, and so that religiously diverse groups can work together on initiatives we can agree on.

Muslims revere Jesus as a prophet, and we can certainly agree that Jesus' ministry was very much in line with that of the 8th century prophets from the Old Testament: Amos, Micah, Jeremiah. But for us he is more than a prophet.

People who aspire to no faith in particular will happily call Jesus a great teacher. And we can certainly agree that he was that. No argument there.

The spiritual-but-not-religious look for higher truths from Jesus, the Buddha, Mohammed and the Kabbalah. All are pathways to the divine, they say, and help themselves cafeteria style to a little of everything. We can certainly agree that God works mightily in traditions and cultures that differ from our own.

But for us, Jesus has authority. We see his authority in action here at the beginning of his ministry in the gospel of Matthew. And he will say something about his authority quite directly at the end of the gospel of Matthew in the passage that we call the Great Commission. In Matthew 28, the crucified and risen Jesus has these last words to say to his disciples:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations..."

God speaks. Things happen. Jesus speaks with the authority of God. With *all* authority. He speaks, things happen. Jesus calls out to a couple of fishermen, "Follow me!" And they do. Jesus speaks at the end of the gospel, to his disciples, and to us by extension. "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations..." And.... do we?

For Christians Jesus is more than a prophet and more than a great teacher. Christianity grants authority to Jesus. Christianity regards Jesus' words as divinely authoritative.

Now, everybody knows that Baby Boomers never liked authority figures. That meant that Generation X never got a memo from the Baby Boomers on that topic. As for the Millennials, they have no clue what the church believes because they find no compelling reason to be here.

We preach the authority of Christ in an era that is trending away from that way of thinking. We preach the authority of Christ in an interfaith age, in what some have called a Post-Christian Era. We preach the authority of Christ to people who aren't even asking the "authority" question in the first place.

What are we going to do about this?

I think the answer to that question is very exciting.

I think the best way for us to preach the authority of Jesus Christ is found in this story. The best way to preach it is to do it. Live it. Together. Get out of our boats. Drop our nets. No more business-as-usual for us!

The best way to preach Jesus' authority is for us let his words govern our actions. Turning the other cheek, going the second mile, praying without ceasing, judging not, and rendering to God what belongs to God... These are the sorts of actions that illustrate the authority of Christ. This is what giving authority to Jesus looks like in ordinary human terms.

In order to let his words govern our actions we will need to know what his words are. We will need to read, and study, our Bibles. We will need to hear the Word proclaimed in the form of a sermon, and study it in the privacy of our own devotional lives.

In order to let his words govern our actions, we will need to cultivate our prayer lives. We will need to learn to listen as much as we talk in our prayers. We will need sometimes just to be and breathe in God's presence with no agenda of our own whatsoever. We will need to make sure that when we do pray for things, that our prayers are connected to actions, so that we are praying responsibly and not to get ourselves off the hook for solutions.

In order to let his words govern our actions, we will need to decide up front that our money is part of the equation. Decisions about money fall under the authority of Jesus just like every other decision. And we will just have to wrestle with that.

In order to let his words govern our actions, we should note that Jesus didn't call disciples one by one. He didn't give them private lessons, and send them out alone on individual assignments. Discipleship has from the beginning been a group exercise. Just believing something about Jesus in the privacy of your own cognition is not discipleship. Christianity is a team sport. It takes a village.

In order to let his words govern our actions, we will need to be ready to share in his suffering if suffering is required. In his book, The Cost of Discipleship, (pub. 1937), Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "When Christ calls a man he bids him come and die." Bonhoeffer died for opposing the Nazis in World War 2 Germany. Christ's call and Christ's teachings led him to resist. Christ's call and Christ's teachings had such authority for him that he took actions that eventually led to his own death.

Where do we need to stand with courage? For what principles? Against what social ills? How far are we willing to put our selves "out there"? On the line?

Maybe "they" will start believing in the authority of Christ when we start believing it, really believing it, ourselves.

Answering the question, *how is Christ authoritative in our lives?* may well hold the secret of the revitalization of churches in our nation. Maybe that is too bold of a projection, but maybe not. We can at least test the hypothesis. Starting here and now

We can give Christ authority OVER our lives: time, talent, treasure, hopes, relationships, dreams, loves, losses, baggage, regrets. What we have, who we are, who we will be, the quality of our life together, all are accountable to Christ.

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Who are we? We are baptized and we are called to be the New Community.

The New Community: us, forever getting out of our boats and hitting the beach running to keep up with Jesus. The New Community: us, forever dropping our nets and turning our attention away from our own well being to the way of Christ, the way of the Cross. The New Community: us, leaving what must be left from previous generations in order to fish for people now.

The New Community--grieving our losses and embracing our changes as we follow the one whose words and whose reconciling love are truer than the truest thing we have ever known.

To the glory of God. Amen.

*~Rev. Ruth L. Boling*