

## Sermon by Christopher Girata

Matthew 4:12-23  
(Epiphany 3 - Year A)  
27 January 2008

From our Gospel lesson, Jesus says, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

In this lesson, Jesus begins his ministry by traveling to Galilee. After his baptism and temptation by the devil in the preceding verses, Jesus walked down to the Sea of Galilee. He noticed four fishermen on the shore of the sea - Peter, Andrew, James, and John - and told them to follow him. Scripture says, "Immediately they left their nets...the boat and their father, and followed him." Done. Simple as that.

Most of us know this story so well that we may think that the call from Jesus was just that simple. Jesus said, "Jump!" and the fishermen said, "How high?" When we think about these four men, destined to be four of The Twelve Apostles, it may be easy to simply think that they were great men, great saints of the Church, so of course they would leave their nets and follow Jesus. Yet if we look at this passage with fresh eyes, perhaps we will see that the story is a bit stranger than that. In fact, what we see is a group of hard-working fishermen who drop everything - drop their whole lives: profession, friends, *and* family - to follow this random man strolling down the beach.

In fact, this story is significant not in its familiarity, but in its subtle oddity. These men were just like you and me - working hard to support themselves and their families. Yet they walked away from everything that the world asked them to do and be, from the pressures of culture and society, to turn toward the truth of God that they found in Jesus.

One of my favorite movies is a lesser-known film from the early nineties called *Household Saints*. The film chronicles three generations of Italian-Americans living in New York City in the 1950s. As any great story of mystic spirituality should, *Household Saints* begins with a rousing game of pinochle in the back room of Santangelo's Sausage Shop. In that pinochle game, Joseph Santangelo wins the right to marry his friend's daughter, Catherine. The couple *does* marry and begins their life in relative poverty, but in short order, their financial life takes a turn for the better.

Even though they were raised in a staunchly Catholic, Italian-immigrant community, the Santangelos begin to live more fully in the burgeoning culture of the 1960s and 70s. They repaint their apartment in pretty pastels, Catherine begins to wear makeup, Joseph grows a mustache, and they buy a full set of Tupperware. Life is good!

Yet, the Santangelo's only child, Teresa, can't seem to get on board their train of success. Raised a good, Catholic girl, Teresa, rejects her parents' modern lifestyle, full of stuff and without adequate worship of God. One night, over dinner, Teresa announces her desire to become a nun, to which her father Joseph explodes, forbidding her to do so. In her

desperation, Teresa prays incessantly to her namesake, St. T  r  se of Lisieux, asking St. T  r  se to make it possible to be holy in the world by serving God in the little things. Teresa, with St. T  r  se’s help, decides that small acts can serve God just as well as grand ones, saying, “There is grace to be won by scrubbing floors.”

As Teresa struggles to grow closer to God through her holy housework, she begins to see visions of Christ. Now by visions, I mean that Jesus walks and talks with Teresa, doing normal daily activities. Once, Jesus even comes to help Teresa iron and fold a large amount of laundry. She speaks with Christ regularly and begins to consider him her special friend. Sadly, as she grows in her devotion to the Christ who visits her regularly, she grows farther apart from her family’s modern dream of financial wealth. She denies the wealth that has come to her family and eventually, her family begins to believe she has lost her mind. Convinced that she has gone insane, her parents commit Teresa to a mental hospital where she is destined to remain. Even within those walls, Teresa remains committed to serving God in all the little things she does day to day.

As one film critic writes, “the closing scenes [of the movie] are transcendent, as Teresa drifts away from [her family’s plan] and into a plan of her own, for loving Jesus. The fact is that modern people do worship false gods and that a life devoted to getting a big car and a town house is seen as eminently more sane than a life devoted to God. You can decide for yourself whether Teresa goes mad. In an earlier age, people would have known how to think of her.”\*

And so, we turn back to today’s Gospel lesson where a group of hardworking fishermen deny everything that their culture tells them to be in order to follow Jesus. Do we view these fishermen as insane? How many of us, after hearing the reading, actually see this band of apostles as *very sane*, yet when we are face to face with decisions that jeopardize our life with Christ, why can’t we turn toward Christ as well? Why are we constantly falling short of the simple and immense call that God puts to each of us, every day?

In the end, the answer is simple: we are not perfect. Our imperfection, in fact our basic humanity, keeps us from the God who wants so badly to be with us completely. Even the great saints of our Gospel lesson never get it *all* right. They go so far in their efforts to live with God, yet they deny God even at the foot of the cross. How, then, can we ever live up to the call God makes to us today?

As Christians, we hope for the presence of God on earth. Our hope rests in the words of Jesus in today’s Gospel lesson: “the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Indeed the kingdom of heaven, God’s presence on earth, has come near and remains near to each of us. Our hope is in the promise that God will transform this earth from its current, imperfect state, into that which is perfect in God’s eyes.

By hope, I do not mean wishful thinking or a shallow desire for something we simply *want*. Hope is not like the dream I had as a boy to make a million dollars... especially not now that I’m wearing this collar! Hope goes far beyond that. True biblical hope is the faith that something will *actually happen*. Our hope rests in the faithfulness of God, proven over time, “to make all things new.”

This hope sets us free from despair. We will certainly experience disappointment. We will certainly experience loss. Yet our hope in the faithfulness of a real and present God will sustain us.

True hope in God reminds me of my wife, Nicole, as she nears her final month of pregnancy. As I'm sure many of you know either from watching a woman go through this final stage of pregnancy, or being one yourself, the final month does not get any easier as it progresses. Nicole has begun to be tired more often than not, her back is almost always sore, and her appetite is constantly fluctuating. Yet she never despairs in the pain because the hope of holding her baby girl sustains her. She knows that the pain will continue to increase, and in the final moments of delivery the pain will seem almost impossible to overcome. Yet in the end, after the pain is over, she will celebrate the beauty of creation and the faithfulness of God in the life of her newborn baby.

All of our hope rests in the power of God, the faithfulness of God to recreate the brokenness of our world into the beauty of heaven. The promise of a life with God is far greater than the promise of material wealth or success. When face to face with the call of God to follow the path of faith, the hope of a life with Christ will sustain us.

One final story is of a reporter who traveled to India to witness and write about the work of Christian missionaries. One day, he was walking past the gated entrance of a leper colony. As he watched, a young nun attended to an old man in the shadow of the large gate. She carefully cleansed the man's sores and cleaned his face before ushering him through the gate. As the young nun turned to leave, the reporter stopped her. He said, "Sister, I would not do what you do for a million dollars." The young nun looked up into the reporter's eyes and replied, "Neither would I."

God's promise rings true: the kingdom of heaven is very near indeed.

Amen.

---

\* Roger Ebert. *The Chicago Sun-Times*. 1993. Household Saints, October 1.