

Being formed into community—telling our stories into our fuller humanity
Micah 6:1-8; Matthew 5:1-12

“Being formed into community—telling our stories into our fuller humanity.”

Our theme this year is big. It’s not only long, but it’s layered and complex. I’m especially aware of that as I’ve been listening to the Texts this week...and Keith’s sermon last week. Call and repentance are woven into our formation as community. Call and repentance give shape to our stories. Call and repentance open us—individually and as a community—open us into the fullness of our humanity—the persons and the community we have been created to be.

As I read Keith’s sermon, I began to see that *call* and *repentance* are two sides of the same coin. (Maybe you all knew that already?!) And whether consciously or unconsciously, call and repentance are *always* part of formation and growth for human beings.

But it also occurs to me that these words are loaded and heavy with memories and meanings. And because sometimes it’s hard to hear through all the meanings and memories we’ve accumulated. So I want to take a few minutes for a kind of vocabulary lesson. Not because we don’t know what words mean, but so that, hopefully, we can come to a shared understanding when we hear certain words.

The word *call*. My associations with *call* are somewhat heavy. People are *called* to significant work, like being a missionary in another country. People are *called* to serve in particular kinds of work, especially when the work is volunteer work, or low paying work. Social workers and teachers are called. Accountants and businesspeople are not. Of course this isn’t true. But that’s how we tend to think and talk about *call*. When I entered seminary, people asked me about my *call*. No one ever asked about my calling when I worked at Maple City Market. How we often use this word is that people are *called* into certain vocations while other people have careers or jobs.

I suggest we reject this understanding of *call*. When Jesus called his disciples, he extended them an invitation. What if we think of *call* as simply that, an invitation to follow Jesus? And we can follow Jesus in any work we do, paying or volunteer, domestic or abroad. And we can even follow Jesus when we're *not* working. *Calling* is first of all an invitation from God, an invitation to live in God's living and loving presence, to walk with Jesus, and to let the Holy Spirit breathe abundant, eternal life into us.

So *call* is the invitation. And it comes to us in different ways, via booming John the Baptist cries or the simplicity of Jesus' words, "Follow me." *Calls* can come to us in silence or in the whispers of trees and insects. We hear God's invitation when we're waiting or expecting it, and when we least expect it.

The call of Christ can be ignored. Or, it can be accepted. We always have a choice. And when we choose to accept, repentance will follow. And here we have another word heavy with memories and meanings. My guess is that for many of us, our given understanding of *repentance* means confession. To *repent* is to confess our sins. *Repenting* is speaking words of wrongdoing, apology, and regret. But when John the Baptist and Jesus say, "Repent," the Greek word is *metanoia*. And *metanoia* means changing our minds and hearts, changing our intentions and purposes, changing our thinking and our understanding. Repentance, *metanoia*, isn't something that's spoken and then done, it's a process that takes time. And practice. (Interestingly, *metanoia* in the OT is most often about God. It's usually translated as *relent*, but it's the same word as *repent*.)

The call of Christ is always a call to repent. A call to change and be changed, a call to turn and be turned. When Jesus calls his disciples, *we see*, *we watch* their repentance: they leave their nets and walk away. It isn't just that they change jobs or change their direction, it's that they *release* their nets, they get out of their boats and *leave* them. Do you see that? Release and

letting go are part of repentance. Release is at the heart of *metanoia*. If we want to change and be changed, we will necessarily need to release what we're currently holding, leave whatever boat or vessel is holding us. To accept Christ's call and to repent, we will need to let go of the nets that we're holding onto. The nets that have held our thinking. The nets that have held our beliefs. The nets that have held our habits. *Metanoia* can be dramatic and immediate—something happens and we are forever changed. (Like Saul on the road to Damascus.) But *metanoia* is also the daily choosing, choosing to let the Spirit of God blow away that which is no longer useful, that which keeps me from thriving, and choosing to let myself be turned and changed. Repentance is a daily readiness to release what I've been holding and let the Spirit of God change me—change my thinking, my believing. Change my place. Change my stories.

If we are to *be formed into community*, and if we are to *tell our stories into our fuller humanity*, we *will* be changed. There *will* be release for us as individuals. And release as a community. If we as a community accept Christ's call and repent, collectively we will release our communal net, leave our communal boat, giving ourselves to the change and formation that following Jesus will bring today. It's easy enough to watch the first disciples leave their nets and boats, but if we tell the truth, it's terrifying to think of leaving our nets. But nets that were lifegiving and contributed to thriving in one season of life, are the same nets that in another season can become useless and deadweight. It takes much courage, individually and collectively, to release them so that the Holy Spirit of God can blow and burn. And breathe new life—new nets and boats—ones we can't now imagine.

But those first disciple released their nets so that they could be changed. And they followed Jesus, the Human One. They were open to hearing something new. They were

ready to have their thinking and understandings and beliefs changed. The disciples were ready for *metanoia* and Jesus was ready to teach.

To create space for talking to his new disciples, Jesus needed to get away from the crowds that were following him. So he went up the mountain and the disciples joined him there. And he began teaching:

- Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
- Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice....
- Blessed are the humble, the gentle, the merciful, the clean of heart, the peacemakers....
- Blessed are those oppressed for the sake of justice....
- Blessed are you when you are mocked and shamed and when people tell lies about you....

Jesus begins his teaching with blessings. To these men who have left their nets and boats in order to be changed in unknown ways, Jesus begins by assuring them that they are already blessed. Listen to the ones who are already blessed: the poor in spirit; the mourners; the humble; the merciful. By most worldviews and by most ways of thinking and believing, it would seem as though these are the very people who have been abandoned by God. They are the people we assume have done something wrong to find themselves in these circumstances. Or they are sinners and unworthy of God's blessing. And yet, the list of those who are already blessed goes on and on. Blessing after blessing after blessing. This is beginning of Jesus' instruction. No finger pointing. No demanding. No papers or books to read. Only blessings.

And if we watch Jesus talking to those sitting with him, we can see their bodies start to relax. We can see their chests rising and falling as they breathe in and out, more deeply each time, filling their lungs, their bellies, down to their toes with these amazing words of assurance, of blessing, of love. When Jesus responded to John's call and entered into the

waters to begin being changed, the heavens opened and the Spirit of God blessed him, “You are my beloved son.” And now Jesus, living and growing into the change that has begun in him, is extending and sharing the blessing he received to those with him.

As we watch this scene, we see Jesus, so full, so energized, so *spirited* with a sense of his full, holy, blessed humanity that he is bursting to share it with others. Watching Jesus and listening to his words, with the disciples we too *experience* the profound love, the exquisite love, the being and belonging that this love creates. It is a love and grace and mercy so spacious, so generous that Jesus has experienced. It sustained him in the wilderness; it is sustaining him now. And Jesus knows that *no matter what*, he is blessed, he is fortunate, because the love and mercy of Creator God is for him. And for all human beings. For *us*.

This love sustained him, changed him, blessed him. And Jesus understands that this same love and blessing is waiting and ready to change his disciples, to change the crowds, to change us.

But it isn't just that Jesus is blessing his new disciples. Or us. It's that these blessings are reversals. Reversals that will change us. The ways of empire say the rich, the happy, the powerful are the blessed, the privileged ones. The reversals in these blessings call us to change—to change our understandings and beliefs about favor and privilege. And about what it means to be human. As we are being changed, what we hear and see is that God's blessings are *never* absent, God's favor is *always* present.

These blessings are not commandments. They're not a list of things to do or accomplish. Rather, these blessings are our calling. And they will change us. These blessings show us what the fullness of our humanity looks like. These blessings are our vocation. And our vocation, our common vocation, is *to be human*.

Jesus, the human one, is teaching us to live out of blessing—not scarcity, not fear—but blessing. Jesus, the human one, is teaching us to live close to suffering—whether our own or others’—teaching us to expect God’s presence. Jesus, the human one, is teaching us to live lives filled with God’s favor, soaking in God love, God’s mercy, God’s grace, God’s beauty, God’s goodness, God’s justice—to live so full of blessings that we cannot help but share them with others. Jesus, the human one, is calling us to be changed—to be changed until we find ourselves formed in the beloved community, the kingdom of God.

Jesus, the son of God is our brother. Jesus, the human one, is teaching us how to be human.

May we sit with Jesus and receive his blessings.

And filled with God’s blessing, may we be changed...again and again....