

Not Just Bent Nails and Burned Out Light Bulbs. Sermon for January 23

A Sermon by Pastor Brad Smith

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The Sermon in a sentence: Always look at what is getting in the way of the kingdom in your life; always look at how God wants to use you in his kingdom.

Why I am preaching it: So we will develop the habit of evaluating our lives in terms of usefulness to the kingdom.

One thing about Jesus: whenever we think we have him figured out, there's a surprise for us. For example, we might read in the Gospels how Jesus said, "Take up your cross and follow me," and "He who would gain his life must lose it for my sake." We say, "Now I get it. Jesus is serious. He doesn't want me to fritter away my life in useless ways." And we'd be right. And maybe we start to live a more serious life, and turn down invitations to parties.

But then we read in the Gospels that Jesus' first miracle was to turn water into wine at a wedding party, and that he had a bad reputation among his enemies for going to too many banquets and eating and drinking too much! So we have to take that part of the Gospel story into account as well. Jesus isn't just a serious, other-worldly type religious leader. If we miss how much he enjoyed people, and even banquets, we're going to miss a huge part of what it is to be a Christian.

The past couple of Sundays we have been looking at a particular side of Jesus' character: his kindness and gentleness towards us in our weakness. Two weeks ago we looked mainly at a verse from Isaiah 42: "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out." I suggested that a modern translation for bruised reeds and smoldering wicks might be bent nails and burned out light bulbs. The point was that Jesus always cares for us, no matter how weak and even useless we might be. Several people mentioned to me how much that verse meant to them. We are all bruised and smoldering in one way or another; it brings us great comfort to know that Jesus cares for us just as we are.

Last week followed up with a similar theme. A particular sentence from Pastor Wayne's sermon keeps coming back to me: "The greater the source of light, the gentler the light." Gentleness is not a sign of weakness at all.

Jesus' gentleness towards us is one more evidence of his greatness. That sounds so encouraging, and of course it is. But it's not the whole story. If for the past two weeks Jesus has been sounding like a gentle nurse in a home for invalids, this week he sounds more like a general whipping the troops into order. "Repent!" "Follow me!"

This week's passage is key to understanding what Jesus is all about. If we understand it, we are a good way towards understanding the whole Gospel. More importantly, if we live in obedience to this passage, we are well on the way to living a life that's really worth living. So let's jump in. This is the Gospel of Matthew, and we remember that Matthew was especially interested in how Jesus was the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. He starts out by quoting Isaiah. [Read 4:12-16.] Now in Isaiah's time, the Gentile Assyrians had wiped out the northern kingdom of Israel. The first sections of the nation to be conquered were the areas around the Sea of Galilee, or Naphtali and Zebulon. So Naphtali and Zebulon were about the most bruised and battered real estate around, and yet the great blessing the world was waiting for would come from them! So we already get a hint of what the rest of today's passage has in store for us: Jesus takes that which is bruised and battered and turns it into a source of blessing.

Once Matthew has given us the Old Testament background, he moves right into the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. [Read 4:17-23.] Did you notice that this is a very straightforward passage? Jesus gives one negative command and the reason for it: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." Then he gives one positive command and the reason for it: "Come follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."

Let's start with the first command and reason. What is the kingdom of heaven? And, how can the kingdom of heaven be near? Now the Bible does talk about heaven, and the hope that we have of heaven. But the kingdom of heaven or kingdom of God is something different. The Kingdom of heaven means any place, right in the here and now on this earth, where anybody is following obediently after God. If God is being acknowledged as king, we are in the kingdom of heaven.

I suppose if we wanted to think of the farthest possible place from the kingdom of heaven, we might think of the Nazi extermination camps in World War II. But if you have ever read the book or seen the movie "The Hiding Place," you know that even in that region of hell there were outposts

of the kingdom of heaven where prisoners secretly worshiped and obeyed God.

On a less dramatic level, the monk Brother Lawrence wrote about enjoying God's presence while he scrubbed pots in the kitchen. Every week when we pray the Lord's Prayer together we say, "Thy kingdom come." Have you ever thought about that? We don't pray that we will someday go to be with God, but that God and his ways will come to be with us now. So that's what Jesus meant when he said, "The kingdom of heaven is near." Good news! God isn't far away. His love, his forgiveness, his guidance are available to you right now, in the most ordinary circumstances, even in the worst circumstances.

And because God and his kingdom have come into the world, we need to repent. What does that mean? Repenting simply means changing directions in order to achieve a new goal. Let me say it again: Repenting means changing directions in order to achieve a new goal. We have an example of repentance right here in this passage.

Look what Simon and Andrew and James and John did when they met Jesus. They realized that when Jesus came on the scene, everything suddenly changed. They realized that this man and the kingdom he was talking about were more important than fishing, more important than the Romans and how to get rid them, more important than their own father, more important than anybody or anything else. So they followed him. You could say that they repented of their old life in order to achieve the new goal of following Jesus.

In our staff meeting, Pastor Wayne made the observation that NCI has really been a way for our congregation to repent. Some of the things we are repenting of do not honor God, and we need to feel some sorrow. We found that as a congregation we had a win-lose way of looking at decisions. That wasn't appropriate for God's people. We discovered that as a congregation we were pretty ignorant of the Bible. That wasn't good. How can we follow Jesus if we don't know where he is going? On the other hand, we have made some other changes that don't have anything to do with sin. There was nothing wrong with our old board structure. But our new one is helping us to work better to reach our goal of operating as one church with two languages. We're setting a new direction.

It is a good idea to keep on asking the repentance question throughout our lives: “Is there anything I am saying, thinking, or doing that is getting in the way of my goal of following Jesus?”

There are two things we need to notice about repentance: first, it is a matter of giving up what is less important for what is more important. There was nothing wrong with fishing. At various times in their lives the disciples took up fishing again. But when Jesus called them, they let go of the less important in exchange for the more important.

It’s a very easy principle to grasp. We repent all the time. If I am trying to lose weight, I repent of the second scoop of rice and the gravy. A young man who wants to spend maximum time with his girlfriend repents of the TV shows he used to watch on Friday and Saturday evenings.

So that is the first thing about repentance: it involves exchanging the less important for the more important. And in the case that Jesus is talking about, the payoff is not just a few less pounds or a few more hours with Sally, but life with God himself. That’s the first thing about repentance. The second thing is this: we must realize that repent is an action verb, not a feeling verb.

I have a friend who will call me every once in a while to tell me that he wants to turn his life around and get off of his abusive use of prescription pain killers. Sometimes he will cry and tell me how he wants to get his life right with God. Then I ask him where the pills are, and he says that they are in the bathroom. I suggest that he dump them down the toilet. There is silence, and he changes the subject. I have no doubt that he truly feels sorry and guilty for what he is doing, but he has not repented. There is no new direction.

Here is another example of inadequate repentance: I know another man who has stolen a TV and some other electronic items. He says he feels terrible about it, and he also struggles in developing a relationship with God. I asked him if he had returned the items. He said no, because they were no longer new. Then I asked if he had gone to the store and paid for them, and he said no, he was afraid of getting prosecuted. Then I asked if he could send the store a money order without his name on it, and he had some reason not to do that as well. That’s why he is unable to enjoy the kingdom of heaven. Repentance includes starting off in a new direction, but it also includes making right the damage you have done.

There we have the negative command of Jesus and the reason: Turn away from everything that might get in the way of living the life God has for you, and you will begin to experience the presence of God.

But he has more. The positive command is, “Come follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” It’s not just the negative command of, “Turn away from what hinders God’s work in your life and you will get to know him.” It is also, “Start following Jesus and he will use you to bring other people to God.”

There’s something very intriguing about Jesus words. The disciples gave up their fishing for the sake of following Jesus, and Jesus turned right around and made them into fishermen all over again! He didn’t say to the fishermen, “I will make you carpenters of men.” And when later on he called the tax collector Matthew, he didn’t say to him, “I will make you a fisher of men.” Jesus created each of us. He knows how we are put together individually and as a congregation because he’s the one who put us together. And generally, he will use who we already are to bring blessing to the world.

Think again about Peter and Andrew and James and John. There have been lots of things written about how the characteristics of a fisherman can be effective in the kingdom of heaven. Above all, fishermen must be patient. They may go hours or days without a catch without giving up.

Fishermen must be extremely knowledgeable of the fish they want to catch. Some fish come to the surface at night, others during the day. Some respond to one lure, some to another. We may think of the solitary fisherman standing with his pole at daybreak, but the Bible knew nothing of solitary fishing. They worked together using nets, so the effective fisherman had to be a good teamworker, in moment-by-moment communication with his partners.

You can easily make the connections of how the patience, attention to detail, and teamwork that these fishermen had learned would serve them well as Jesus used them in his kingdom work.

I think Christians commonly make a mistake in thinking that once we are converted, God will want to use us in some way that is totally different from how we were before. Sometimes he does; usually he doesn’t.

Some of you know that while I was at UH I majored in anthropology, which is the study of how people relate in different cultures. I wasn't sure what the job possibilities would be, but it was very interesting for me. Not too long after I became a Christian I went to a follow-up to the Urbana Missionary Conference. While I was there I introduced myself to a missionary and told him, "I am an anthropology major. What should I switch to if I am going to be a missionary?" I thought he would tell me to switch to Bible or to foreign languages. His reply surprised me: "Stay right where you are. You will find it very useful if you ever become a missionary." During my UH years I also became friends with a couple of students from Okinawa, and in that way I was introduced to Japanese culture.

As a graduate student I majored in Teaching English as a Second Language. I wasn't sure how I was going to use it, but somehow it seemed like the right next step. Towards the end of my course of study I went to get my haircut, and ran into an acquaintance in the barber shop. We made small talk, and when I mentioned that I was studying TESL, he said that he happened to have a brochure from a mission that was looking for English teachers. He wasn't interested, so I could have it if I wanted.

I took it, and I couldn't believe my eyes. This happened almost 33 years ago, but I still remember the feeling of amazement. All the events of the past several years—majoring in anthropology, getting to know something about Japan, majoring in ESL, were perfect preparation for this ministry of reaching people in Japan through teaching English, and I didn't even know that such a ministry existed. Becky and I were still new members of Makiki at that time, and I will always be grateful that you were willing to help support us during that time in Tokyo.

Whether you are single or married or widowed or divorced, whether you are in great health or restricted in your diet and activity, whether you are widely traveled or have never been off the island, you are just who is needed for some particular area of service in the kingdom of heaven. We all have characteristics or failures that make us feel like a bruised reed or a smoldering wick. We'll find that even those areas will enable us to fish for somebody—that is, to care for them, to encourage them, to build them up, in a way that nobody else could do.

Sometimes Pastor Don used to finish his sermons by giving us homework.
I'll do it too.

Jesus said to repent. As I think of my schedule, my relationships, my thought life, is there anything that is getting in the way of my fully enjoying Jesus? What is it? What am I going to replace it with?

Jesus made fishermen into fishers of men. Who am I? What are my hobbies? Who do I know? What have I experienced in life, whether good or bad? How can I serve in the kingdom of heaven in a way that nobody else can?

Let us pray.