

Sermon January 22, 2023
Congregational UCC
The Dalles, Oregon
Matthew 4:12-23

As Matthew has it, one day Jesus just walked down to the beach, called out to the fishermen to follow him, he'd make them "fisher's of men" ... and they responded with:

"OoooKay!!! Perfect! No problem!

Maybe there's a little more to it than that.

Pray with me if you will.
Challenging God,
May the words of my mouth,
and the meditation of all our hearts
and *miiiiinds* together
be acceptable in your sight
Oh lord our strength
Amen

So. Back to the fishermen.

Very likely, what really happened was that they'd watched all the people gathering on that hill beside the lake, hanging on to Jesus's every word. So one day they got really curious and walked up to hear for themselves, whatever it was that drew all these people to this interesting man.

He was talking all right. Words like: "Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled."

That got Simon Peter's attention. He had been hungering and thirsting for righteousness all right, all his life he'd been hungering. And thirsting.

All four of them liked what they heard. Jesus liked what he saw. He asked them to join with him in ministry.

So they said: "Well, we're interested. What do we have to do?"

Jesus:
"All you have to do is love, love your neighbor."

You know the story. Over the next couple of years they learned he didn't just mean love the neighbor you like. Nope. There was much more to it than that. They watched. They listened. They learned ... but loving as Jesus loved was not easy.

THEN Jesus shocked them to their core. He told them, ...

“You can do what I've done. You can do as I'm doing. *You can do these things.*”

Wait! C'mon. **Really?!**
Let me read it.

Does anyone have their Bible with them?

[Here I asked the question. Remember, this is a UCC church. They don't want anyone to think they might be Methodists, or worse yet, Southern Baptists! Southern Baptists want to be seen with their Bibles. I thought I was going to have to read from the pulpit bible. But one dear woman in the last row held her bible up. So I walked back and read from her bible. I did all this because years ago, in the big and wealthy Calvary Presbyterian Church on Pacific Heights in San Francisco where I did my internship I quoted this scripture and, following that 3 different people accused me of making it up.]

John 14:12

“Very truly I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do, and in fact, will do even greater works than these because I am going to the father.”

Of course the people hearing this protested mightily.

“What are you smoking man?! We can't do what you do! You're Jesus, for God's sake!”

I think Jesus probably responded with something like:

“*Calm down people!* You've been with me for going on three years now. You've watched me. You know how! You. can. DO. this.”

What do you think?. Did he really tell his team they could do as he'd done ... even greater than he had?

I think so. And I think he meant it!

I think he also expected all of **us** to follow his lead.

There have been a few people who took him at his word, followed his lead. One, Martin Luther King whose life we celebrated last week.

Another, Abraham Lincoln.

I've been reading Jon Meacham's new book *Let There Be Light* about him. He makes it very clear that Lincoln took Jesus at his word. Now, let me be clear, Jon Meacham is no theologian but he's one hell of a historian.

I knew Lincoln was a good, brave, amazingly patient man. What I didn't know was how important the scriptures were to him.

One example ... during his second inauguration, he quoted, straight from Matthew.

As a central part of his inauguration speech he read chapter 7, verse 24:

24 "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine—and puts them into practice— is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. **25** The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. **26** But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. **27** The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."

Jesus makes it clear
and Lincoln pointed it out in his speech—that merely hearing the words isn't adequate. A man if he is to be wise, must act on those words.

Abraham Lincoln read these things—probably all his life—in Matthew, about the difference between a wise and foolish man. And in John, the "you can do this" one. And, as he did with much of the scripture, Abe took these two seriously. He acted like Jesus, and he modeled his life on his impression of who and what he thought Jesus was.

Sadly there are precious few examples of others like him in positions of leadership.

Maybe that's because they, and we,
we think we have to be larger than life figures ...

like Jesus? Like Abraham? Heck neither of them were superstars, not by any means!

Jesus was a carpenter's kid from a poor little backwater village up in the hills. Lincoln was a log splitter's son from yes, another poor and down-on-its-luck place in slave-holding eastern Kentucky! They were both humble, empathic, eminently patient and serene men.

Neither was a life-of-the-party, self-absorbed kind of a man.
Neither of them stood out as children.
Neither of them stood out as teenagers.
Neither of them thought of themselves as special, up until the day they died they were humble, self-deprecating men.

Abraham Lincoln: "I may move slowly, but I never move backward." That's how he thought of himself.

He also said: "Moral cowardice is something I think I never had."

Let me read that again. Lincoln said: "Moral cowardice is something I think I never had."

I won't be surprised—if I ever get the chance to ask him—to hear Jesus say: "Yeah, old Abe and I had that in common."

For sure Abe. You were never a coward, ever. Nor you, *dear* Jesus.

Why did these men not fall victim to the almost universal tendency to fold our tent when given the opportunity to love the unlovable?

Or help the helpless.

Why do people think staying under the radar is the better path? They think they are being diplomatic. I think they are merely delaying the inevitable. And of course, things get worse the longer we wait for good to trump evil.

We'd like to think the situation we all find ourselves in today isn't as bad as 1860.

Really?

I think our circumstances cry out for a leader like Abraham Lincoln.

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OK. Enough with all this heaviness.

Let me close with a beautiful prose poem written by a woman I recently learned about.

See if you agree with me that she brightly illustrates what Jesus meant by “love your neighbor.”

It's called *Gate A-4*

Written by Naomi Shihab Nye

Wandering around the Albuquerque Airport Terminal, after learning my flight had been delayed, FOUR hours, I heard an announcement:

"If anyone in the vicinity of Gate A-4 understands any Arabic, please come to the gate immediately.

Well—one pauses these days. Gate A-4 was my OWN gate. I went there.

An older woman in full traditional Palestinian embroidered dress, just like my grandma wore, was crumpled to the floor, wailing.

"Help," said the flight agent. "Talk to her. What is her problem? We told her the flight was going to be late and she did this."

I stooped to put my arm around the woman and spoke haltingly.

"Shu-dow-a, Shu-biduck Habibti. Stani schway, min-fadlick, Shu-bit-SA-wee."

(It takes at least months to learn Arabic and I've had exactly four days of lessons. But I think Nye is saying: "Please dear lady. What are you so upset about?! It's going to be all right.")

The minute she heard any words she knew, however poorly used, she stopped crying. She thought the flight had been cancelled entirely. She needed to be in El Paso for major medical treatment the next day.

I said, "No, we're fine, you'll get there, just later, who is picking you up? Let's call him."

We called her son, I spoke with him in English. I told him I would stay with his mother till we got on the plane and ride next to her. She talked to him. Then we called her other sons just for the fun of it. Then we called my dad and he and she spoke for a while in Arabic and found out of course they had ten shared friends. Then I thought just for the heck of it why not call some Palestinian poets I know and let them chat with her? This all took up two hours.

She was laughing a lot by then. Telling of her life, patting my knee, answering questions. She had pulled a sack of homemade mamool cookies—little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts from her bag—and was offering them to all the women at the gate. To my amazement, not a single woman declined one. It was like a sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the mom from California, the lovely woman from Laredo—we were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. There is no better cookie.

And then the airline broke out free apple juice from huge coolers and two little girls from our flight ran around serving it and they were covered with powdered sugar, too.

And I noticed my new best friend—by now we were holding hands—had a potted plant poking out of her bag, some medicinal thing, with green furry leaves. Such an old country tradition. Always carry a plant. Always stay rooted to home.

And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and I thought, This is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person in that gate—once the crying and confusion stopped—seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies.

I wanted to hug all those other women, too.

This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost.

[pause, deep breath]

Naomi Shihab Nye could have ignored the airport announcement, kept quiet, and no one would have noticed.

This is a GOOD world. This story provided healing when I needed it. I think there's probably healing in it for someone here today ...

Amen

