

Trinity United Church of Christ
Third Sunday after Epiphany
January 22, 2012
The Rev. George P. Heberling

Jonah 3: 1-5, 10
Psalm 65: 5-12
I Corinthians 7: 29-31
Mark 1: 14-20

Time. What time is it? It used to be that when you walked up to someone and asked them what time it is, they would look at their watch and say, "It's about quarter after whatever hour it happened to be." You knew that was somewhere close to the time. But now, with digital watches, you walk up to someone and ask the time, they will look at watch and tell you that it is precisely sixteen minutes, twelve seconds after the hour. Time has become a matter of precision and obsession. Have you gone to purchase a watch lately? It's difficult to find an old-fashioned watch with an hour, minute and second hand. And you almost need an engineering degree to figure out what all the buttons do. A simple digital watch will tell you only the time and the date, but watches, like cars, now come with options. You can get a stop watch as an option, or an alarm clock; it can be worn under water, it can be set to keep track of how long you have been jogging. Sometimes with all the options, the most difficult part of a digital watch is simply finding the button that tells the right time. And even watches have become obsolete for a lot of people because if you ask them what time it is, they will simply look at their cell phone, whose time is calibrated by satellite, an even more precise reckoning of time.

Time. What time is it? It's time to get ready to go to work, or go to school, or go to church. Time in another sense. It's time for a change. An event or a movement of body and spirit into a different plane or understanding. "The time is fulfilled. The Kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe this good news!" With these words Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee. And then, walking along the Sea of Galilee, Jesus spies some fishermen, and says to them, "Follow me," and their response is to stop what they are doing and follow. Their perception of time and place changed; something new was happening and the time had come for them to respond. What is happening here? How are we to understand this somewhat unusual and astounding message and equally strange response of the fishermen?

Jesus came to proclaim that God was doing something different. The way that people had been looking at the world around them and their faith was not longer valid. The rules as defined by the religious leaders no longer applied. A narrow view of pleasing God through obedience to a set of laws was a wrong vision of how to be in a proper relationship. In God's time, here was an opportunity for people to begin a whole new way of understanding the world. The old patterns no long fit. The old way of looking at things is no longer appropriate. God offers a different approach to those who are willing to follow.

It is a call to look at the world with a new vision. Repentance means stopping what you are doing now, stop the way you are thinking now, and embrace God's way of thinking about our world. Stop acting as if you are helpless to bring about change in the world and start realizing that if you can

bring hope and comfort to one other person, that is what God desires. Stop feeling you count for very little and begin to realize that, as a child of God, you are important and have uniqueness to offer the world. Stop making your first priority yourself and begin to look at the person next to you as a child of God and precious in the eyes of God. A radically new way to look at ourselves and others. A difficult vision, yet God's way of thinking about the world.

The way to respond to Jesus' message is to leave what you are doing and start acting appropriate to God's Kingdom. The point is that until we start living as if we are part of God's kingdom, that kingdom will never come. God isn't going to plop the kingdom down here for us. It's not going to happen that way, at least not right now. If you're going to be part of the kingdom, then you have to let go of how you have thought and acted in the past and start living in the future, as if God's kingdom were already here.

It is we who are part of the church who need to serve as models for this kingdom of God. The church is to live as if the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is here. We are indeed a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people. As such we bear the message of what God's kingdom is like. We can tell the world that this kingdom is like the world of the Good Samaritan where your enemy is now your neighbor. It looks like the scene where the hungry are fed, and the homeless have shelter, and the sick are cared for, where the prisoner is visited and the thirsty are given water. It is like the prostitute who was forgiven and released from her sin and shown understanding and compassion. The kingdom is like the woman

at the well who was given life-giving water and restored to wholeness. The kingdom is like the Gerasene demoniac who was freed of the evil inside of him and was accepted. The kingdom is like that; and the church, bearing God's message of Good News, should be like that as well. God's people act because we have experienced the kingdom at work in our lives already – God reaching out to touch us and claim us, and our responding through our commitment to see God's will be done.

Jesus chose a most unusual group to witness and to proclaim the kingdom. They were not highly educated or leaders in the community or particularly holy; instead he chose fishermen, ordinary folks with only one thing in common: they were open to receive and to respond to this message of God's kingdom. In calling the Galilean fisherman to discipleship, Jesus does not just ask them to add one more task to their busy lives. He calls them into a new way of being. When Simon and Andrew leave their nets, they leave their way of life. This is even clearer with James and John, who leave not only their nets but also their father. These disciples leave all that which was familiar to them – their pattern of work, family, and place and gain a new identity – as people who develop a whole new life – not primarily known for their work, for their family, for their leisure activities, but rather as those living as followers, as people who were living out God's will be done in the here and now on earth as it is in heaven. They were willing to follow, and in following they learned how to live as part of the kingdom. Jesus still calls those who are common, ordinary folk. He calls you and me to live as part of the kingdom of God so we might proclaim the Good News.

The call to follow, to be fishers of people, to find our identity not in our work or our family or our leisure activities but as people of God's kingdom is still valid today, and still incredibly necessary – there are many who either have not ever heard or, who having heard, could not respond for whatever reason. As God's people, individuals or a congregation, it becomes our goal to provide opportunities to witness to God's love in ways that open doors and creatively share the Good News of God's kingdom in the present moment. As a congregation, we affirm that God has been at work among us, within us, and through us to our community and beyond. We continue to seek ways, rich and creative and varied, to make the Gospel known. Like the first disciples we are willing to experiment, to try new things, to risk even failure, in pursuit of the goal – that all may come to know Jesus Christ, God's gift of mercy to all people. The message is age old, but we seek new ways to enliven and to make relevant that the Good News of God's kingdom is here and now.

We choose what time it is for us. We can live the same way, in the same old time we have always lived. Or we can embrace the time that God offers - the time of fulfillment and the time of God's kingdom. In these critical and challenging days, we can make a difference. Let us pray for God's vision of the world to direct and guide our living.