

Congregational United Church of Christ  
Sunday, January 22, 2012  
"Moving Forward" (Mark 1:14-20)  
Rev. Rex Piercy

As meetings go, the annual meeting of this congregation is a generally positive experience and somewhat undercuts the image of the "boring" church meeting. What I especially like about it, beyond the great food (we do know how to potluck around these parts, don't we?) is the way this meeting, coming each year at the end of January, gives us a chance to look back on the previous year and to anticipate the new one already begun. In short, the annual meeting is a sort of collective "moving forward" for this faith community.

One sign of that movement will be the installation of our newly elected 2012 Leadership Team. That, of course, is symbol and formality, or about as formal we get around here in a church that pretty much eschews any high church-y pretense. Recently I joked with one of our Deacons about the attempts we sometimes make to come across "high church" particularly in our worship. We usually screw it up but

that's OK, because "high church" just isn't in our DNA!

That said, such moments as this, as we call out a group of folk from the community for a ministry of leadership in the community is still a mighty important one, whether we surround it with much pomp and circumstance or not.

You see this "calling out" business is at the heart of our faith. Frankly, it's down right fundamental to it. In the Constitution of the UCC we find these words: "The United Church of Christ recognizes that God calls the whole church and every member to participate in and extend the ministry of Jesus Christ by witnessing to the Gospel in church and society" (Article IV, paragraph 17). Being a Christian means you are always and everywhere being called out. We, as UCC Christians, have always affirmed the vocation (calling) as the primary means of the ministry of the baptized.

This morning's Gospel reading from Mark, the earliest and the shortest of the four Gospels in the New Testament, reminds of how central being called out really is. There is always an urgency in Mark's terse prose and this story of Jesus calling his first followers whom we know as disciples is a prime example.

The way in which Jesus went about gathering those who would follow him highlights this urgency! Jesus made it clear from the get-go that those fisherman then and all of us to this very day live in "a special time, an opportune time, a time in which the constellation of factors creates an unusually significant moment," to quote Fred Craddock as he defines what a "kairos" moment really is.

Jesus announced that the Kingdom of God had drawn near, in his own person, and the fisherman at the edge of the Sea of Galilee must have sensed that this was indeed "a special time." They dropped everything to follow him, to see and hear and learn more.

Now none of these officers and leaders whom we will install this morning, and certainly none of the rest of us, has literally dropped

everything to follow Jesus. We still go to our jobs, we still carry on a home life, and we still maintain relationships and engage in activities which are outside the life of the church. After all, while we've heard this story of the calling of the fisherman many times, admit it, most of us wonder how they could do something so drastic? How could they up-end their lives so dramatically, and would that really be a good thing for us to do if we could "manage" it? After all, we have this reality called "the need to survive" and that usually entails a job or an income or something.

But I don't think I am far from the mark in suggesting that such a call still comes to us and Jesus still says to us, "The time is fulfilled" or to quote Eugene Peterson's translation in THE MESSAGE, "Time's up!"

Barbara Brown Taylor is helpful here as she so often is. She says to ask such questions is to miss the point. This story is not about the disciples. And this story is not about us. This story is about God. To focus on what the disciples gave up (and whether we could do the same) is "to put the accent on the wrong syllable." This "miracle story" as she calls it, is

really about “the power of God – to walk right up to a quartet of fisherman and work a miracle, creating faith where there was no faith, creating disciples where they were none just the moment before.”

Maybe this way of approaching this story makes us uncomfortable, especially in a culture like ours that values independence and the ability to make one’s own choices, to determine our own destinies. We tell ourselves - we can do it, yes we can; we can fix everything, improve everything; we can take hold of the future and make it what we want it to be. Or so it goes. And after all, don’t we have to do it? Don’t we have to do it in order to please God and get to heaven? Isn’t it true that the better we are, the more saintly to use the quaint old term, the more likely we are to earn our own salvation?

Taylor calls this “works-righteousness.” What she means is that “what we may have lost on the way is a full sense of the power of God – to recruit people who have made terrible choices; to invade the most hapless lives and fill them with light; to sneak up on people who are thinking about lunch, not God, and

smack them upside the head with glory.”

OK, I know being the Deacon for such and such or doing most anything here at little old Congregational UCC seems a far cry from responding to Jesus’ invitation on the seashore. But is it?

You may have noticed that when Jesus calls these four fishermen he doesn’t give them a new list of things to do. What he gives them is a new identity, a whole new life. What he gives them is a new way to be while they do! What he expects, if we accept the mission as it were, is a change in how we behave...meaning that our actions must now reflect a complete overhaul of our lives; what Jesus expects is a dramatic, even radical transformation of ourselves. The old word for that kind of thing is “conversion.”

So let’s not waste our time this morning wondering whether we would have gotten out of the boat. The real question is, now that you and I have been baptized, are we ready when God acts, when God calls, right now? What does it mean to do the will of God in your life?

The fact is, you see, whether we're ready or not, God acts. With God, it's not "will" it happen, but "when" and "where?"

I like to think that this story of the calling of the fisherman isn't supposed to make us feel guilty, but rather to get us ready for God who shows up and says, "Time's up!" Get busy. The kingdom is here." I also like the fact that Jesus didn't begin his ministry by walking into the temple and announcing who he was and what he was about. He started small, on the edges, with ordinary folks who do ordinary things. Just like you do. Just like I do.

Today a few of us from among us, on behalf of all of us, say yes to some leadership in this little bastion of mission and ministry called Congregational UCC. It's not much, it's not flashy, and it's not huge. But it is something and it's the kind of something that God uses to show forth the kingdom that is here.

Whether we leave our nets for good, or return to them and catch fish in a new way, with a new identity and a whole new life, we are responding to Jesus, and to what God is doing in Jesus.

This business of discipleship, of following Jesus, it isn't some single moment of decision; it's a lifelong commitment, something we have to say yes to every day of the journey. I suspect that those four fishermen who left their nets that day had to do the same thing every morning... they had to decide again to follow Jesus. And we have to do that too. And like them too, we hold on to the promise that the same Lord who binds us together in love will also reveal himself to us and others as we walk together on the road.

We are all called to ministry, every one of us, not just me as a Pastor, not just this team of church leaders, but all of us. And the mystery of this ministry is that we have been chosen...chosen to make our own very limited and very conditional love the gateway for the unlimited and unconditional love of God of blanket this world.

I found this quote this week by the late Roman Catholic Cardinal of Boston, Richard Cushing, who once said:

"If all the sleeping folks will wake up, and all the lukewarm folks will

fire up, and all the disgruntled folks will sweeten up, and all the discouraged folks will cheer up, and all the depressed folks will look up, and all the estranged folks will make up, and all the gossiping folks will shut up, and all the dry bones will shake up, and all the true soldiers will stand up, and all the church members will pray up, and if the Savior of all will be lifted up...then we can have the greatest renewal this world has ever known."

That's really it. The Time's up. The Kingdom of God is really here. It's moving forward. Ready or not, God is acting. We just need to show up when we're called. The story isn't about us. It's about God. Jesus made that abundantly real to those who heard him that day by the lake. God was doing something dramatic in the world and was inviting them to be part of it. Jesus does not simply "add life" to your life, my brothers and sisters. Jesus is Life himself. And if we become his faithful, "all-in" disciples, we will know that Life and that kingdom drawing near, too. We've been smacked upside the head with glory. Now what are we going to do?

Let us pray: God in every time and every place you have called out men and women to be your faithful servants. We now believe you have called us to join that great company of all who seek to follow your Son. Today and always give us a clear sense of your vision, a keen sense of hearing to listen for your call, and the strength to fulfill the ministry given to us when we do see and hear it. We pray in the name of Christ Jesus. Amen.