

NEAR THE BEGINNING

MATTHEW 4:18-5:12

Introduction

I love the prayer we sang together a few minutes ago: “Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the living of these days.”

I believe that God answered that prayer for Elizabeth Lott as she pursued the call to become a pastor. It takes courage and wisdom for a woman who has lived in the ecclesiastical world that many of us did, to become a pastor.

And I believe that God answered that prayer for you, the Saint Charles Avenue Baptist Church, when you called the Reverend Lott to be your pastor. It takes wisdom and courage for a church, not just verbally to affirm the principle of women in ministry, but actually to call a woman as your pastor.

May the Lord bless you for doing that! On behalf of people and churches whom none of us here knows, thank you for what you have done.

Follow Jesus

This morning our Gospel text is about events that stand near the beginning of Jesus’ ministry in Galilee. I think it has some things to say to you as church and to you, Reverend Lott, as pastor, near the beginning of your ministry together here in New Orleans.

The first thing is simply that Jesus calls you to follow him. Matthew intended his readers to understand that what happened by the Sea of Galilee was a pattern for their lives. Jesus calls us. The fishermen followed Jesus, literally. We follow him, too, spiritually. Like the fishermen, we do this as a group, not just as individuals.

Worship God

When the fishermen followed Jesus, one of the places he led them was into the synagogues of Galilee where the God of Abraham and Sarah was read about and talked about and thought about and worshiped. We don’t know whether these fishermen had always attended synagogue, but we know that when they began to follow Jesus, they did. Jesus and his followers worshiped God together.

Jesus was passionate about God. The central image in his preaching was the Kingdom, the Reign of God over the people of God. He taught his listeners to pray, “Thy Kingdom come.” He urged them to enter God’s Kingdom like little children and to seek God’s Kingdom above everything else in life.

Today there are some writers who say that, even though they no longer have faith in God, they are committed to living by the moral and social teachings of Jesus.

I think I can understand this. We live in an era in which the way of life that Jesus taught continues to commend itself to people who are thoughtful and socially aware and morally sensitive. But it also is an era in which faith in the supernatural, faith in God, has become precarious.

But even though it's understandable, isn't it sad that these followers of Jesus are not able to share what was most important to Jesus, namely, loving God?

Let us not settle for less than Jesus intends to give us. By all means let us live by the moral teachings of Jesus—but also allow Jesus to introduce us to God. Let us practice meditation—but also pray, “Our Father who art in heaven.”

Let us be grateful for the way of life that Jesus shows us how to live in this world—but also remember that by his Resurrection Jesus conquered death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

Let's not settle for too little. Let's follow the way of life Jesus taught all the way to the place he intended, namely, to worship the living God.

Love People

When the four fishermen began to follow Jesus, whether in or out of the synagogues of Galilee, over and over they saw him loving and healing and helping people. Later on, when they were ready to use it responsibly, Jesus gave them the power to heal people.

When we today follow Jesus, we will love people and do what we can to heal them and to help them. If we are not loving our neighbors whom we can see, then we aren't loving God whom we can't see.

Of the many corruptions of true religion, none is more tragic than to hurt people in the name of God. You don't have to go as far back as the Catholic Inquisition or the Protestant witch hunts in order to see this awful thing. It's much closer to us than that.

Cultivate Moral Character

When we speak of Jesus' moral and social way of life, it is natural to think in terms of the Beatitudes.

- Blessed are those of a gentle spirit.
- Blessed are the pure in heart.
- Blessed are the merciful.
- Blessed are the peacemakers.

You don't have to be a good person in order to follow Jesus. But when you follow him, you do have to want to become a good person, a better person.

We human beings are naturally self-transcending. We are always reaching out for things beyond ourselves. We want to be happy. We want to be free. We want to understand. We want to be loved.

These desires come naturally to us. They are built into our humanity. They are good.

In the Beatitudes Jesus calls us to want something else, too. He calls us to want to become good people.

And he promises us that, if we really want to become good people, eventually it will happen. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they will be filled.”

We must not ignore our innate self-centeredness. We must be realistic about the sad fact that we have hurt other people. But we must remember that as we follow Jesus together, across the years we will be transformed into better people.

Three Things

The passage from Micah 6 that was read to us gives us a memorable summary of what God requires of us: To do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God.

I think that the passage from the Gospel of Matthew gives us a memorable summary of where we will go when we follow Jesus. We, like the fishermen, will go with Jesus to worship God. We will go with him to love people. When we go with him, he will help us to become better people.

We can't do this alone. Jesus never said we could. The idea that we could do this alone is a by-product of the extreme individualism that characterizes our time in history.

We follow Jesus together. It takes a church. And your church, St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church, is a good place to do that.

You have a tradition of worship that is reverent and beautiful and thoughtful. I expect a lot of you can remember what it was like year after year, when Avery Lee finished his unforgettable sermon on “The Impossible Dream,” to hear Mona Bond sing that song.

You have a tradition of loving and healing and helping people. Perhaps some of you can remember that before he became a national leader in clinical pastoral education, Myron Madden was providing pastoral care here in this congregation.

And you have a tradition of commitment to the highest moral ideals. This has always been a church where ideas take shape in people.

Conclusion

What you have done together in the past, you can continue to do together in the future.

By *together* I am thinking not just about the lay members of your church sharing a common life with each other, but about the lay members sharing a common life together with your new pastor.

God gave you wisdom and courage to call Elizabeth Lott as your pastor. God bless you as together you follow Jesus to worship God, to love people, and to grow in moral life.

St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church, February 2014. <fisherhumphreys@gmail.com>