

Sermon: Embrace Kingdom change: leave, reshape, mend.
January 15th, 2023

NOTE: Just prior to the sermon, the congregation sang this hymn:

TELLING GOD'S STORY: Life, Teaching, and Ministry of Jesus

O Carpenter, Why Leave the Bench 280

CARPENTER CM

Em G D N.C.

1 O car - pen - ter, why leave the bench where
2 O car - pen - ter, why leave the tools to
3 O car - pen - ter, why leave the world of
4 O car - pen - ter, why leave re - pairs with
5 O car - pen - ter, who else could do the

Em D/F# D G Em Am D

wood yields to your art, and take in - stead, to
car - ry out your plans, and go in - stead to
ta - ble, bed, and house, to face the em - pire's
wood and clamp and glue, and rise from death to
work that you have done? What can we do but

G C Am Em/B B Em

try your skill, the ston - y hu - man heart?
do God's work with emp - ty, o - pen hands?
car - pen - try, to lift a Ro - man cross?
seek in - stead to make the whole world new?
sing your praise, O Sav - ior, Ma - ry's son!

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Music: James E. Clemens (USA), 2008, Storm of Grace: Hymns for Worship, © 2015 Selah Publishing Co., Inc.

Good morning. I want to begin this morning's sermon on a note of thanksgiving and appreciation to this community. As a relatively new pastor in my second year of ministry at BMC, I have felt so much love and support from all of you. One of the many ways that you have supported me is through funding my participation in MCEC's Transitions in Ministry program (or TiM as we call it). Two times a year for three years, new pastors within MCEC gather at Hidden Acres to be resourced by skilled MCEC facilitators and leaders, share our ministry journeys together as pastors, and support each other. It is a wonderful and enriching part of being a pastor within MCEC and I am so grateful for BMC's support of me in this way.

One of the more playful and enjoyable parts of our TiM gatherings comes when we are encouraged to write six-word sermons. I'm pretty sure many of you have been exposed to this practice before. It is a really good practice, because it asks us pastors to put aside our tendency to write long and eloquent sermons and to condense what we want to say into six basic words. Of course, those six words are supposed to pack a punch – they are supposed to carry the weight of all the hard work that goes into writing a more traditional sermon, all of the effort expended through digging into the scriptures, praying, and studying. Well, as you might have guessed, I thought that this might be a good practice for today, to preach six words that you can take with you to remember and carry with you as you go about your week ahead. And so, without further ado, here is the six-word sermon for today:

Embrace Kingdom change: leave, reshape, mend. (X2)

Ok! That's it. Time for our hymn of response. [Pretend to walk off]. Ok, not really. While I do want this six-word sermon to stick with you, perhaps as something even to meditate on during your week, *I just can't help* but speak about what burden these six words might carry, how they relate to our scripture for today, and what they might mean for us at BMC. Let's start with

the first three words: **Embrace Kingdom change**. These words try to get at the basic meaning of one Greek word you heard read to you this morning, which was translated as “Repent!” *(Or otherwise)* I suspect that we all have a number of different associations with the word “repent,” and not all of them are positive associations – perhaps they remind us a bit too much of the overly judgmental and even coercive or fear-mongering style of preaching. But the Greek word used here in the imperative mood is *Metanoēite*, and what it quite literally means is something more like: “change your mind” or as another translator puts it, “change your heart.”

In the context of Matthew 4:17, Jesus’ call to *Metanoiēte*, to repent, is a call to think about the world differently and so too to act differently given that “the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This call was, in Jesus’ time, associated with acts of penance and rituals like baptism – after all, Jesus’ words in Matthew 4:17 are the same words Matthew reports John the Baptist using earlier in Matthew 3:2 when he called people to be baptized in the Jordan. As Jesus begins his ministry, I am drawn especially to his appeal to the nearness of the kingdom as the reason that his hearers should embrace change – I can only assume that Jesus’ hearers, like John’s, would have known what he meant when he said that “the kingdom of heaven has come near.” They likely associated this with the common Jewish expectation of God’s coming day of redemption and judgment – a day when God would come to make right the wrongs of the world, to mend its brokenness, and reshape it into the full goodness God intended for it from the beginning. This is why Jesus called this coming kingdom “Good news,” for it countered the bad news of the world. “Change your mind,” said Jesus, for the kingdom is near.

I suspect, however, that one of the biggest hang-ups people might have had with Jesus’ call was with the “change” part. While “good news” of a new kingdom sounds appealing, the bit about having to “change” sounds less appealing. If there is one thing we undeniably share with

Jesus' hearers way back in the first century, it is that we find it hard to embrace kingdom change. Indeed, it is hard for human beings to embrace any kind of change! We are in many ways change-averse creatures, for change can be difficult, uncomfortable, and costly. And that is because embracing change invariably asks us to “**leave** something behind” (and here’s our 4th word). Maybe change asks us to leave behind a comfortable or familiar way of viewing the world, of viewing others, or of viewing ourselves. Maybe change calls us to leave behind destructive habits or self-serving patterns that are keeping us stuck. Maybe change asks us to say goodbye to old aspirations and dreams, or beloved material comforts. Every single one of us in this room can think about the ways that we might struggle with change, and yet, I also suspect that we all know deep down inside that, whether we like it or not, life is one long lesson in learning to embrace change, to change our minds and our hearts, to leave behind what once was familiar for what is unknown.

When Jesus called people to embrace kingdom change, however, he didn’t just call them to embrace a nebulous and uncertain future, a future without hope. Rather, he called them to leave behind old life-patterns to embrace new ones to be discovered in his dynamic presence and under his wise guidance. Jesus was prepared to give this kind of guidance. After all, as our hymn of preparation evocatively described, Jesus was no stranger to change and had himself left behind the carpenter’s bench to embrace the calling God had for him. Of course, not everyone in the community of Jesus’ believers were called to leave behind their original professions to embrace the kingdom change Jesus called them to. His closest disciples did, of course, at least for a period of time. We witnessed this in our scripture reading today with Peter and Andrew, James, and John leaving their nets and following after Jesus. But as becomes clear especially in the Letters of Paul, there were many people in the early Jesus communities who learned to

embrace kingdom change while staying within their professions, often leveraging the privilege their professions gave them to support the work of Jesus and his followers – think here of financially successful women like Joanna, Susanna, Lydia, and Tabitha that the New Testament describes as patrons of Jesus and his followers.¹ Whether following Jesus meant leaving behind your profession (as in the case of the disciples) or leveraging it in new ways (as in the case of those successful women), it nonetheless always involved a kind of basic renunciation, a giving up, and a willingness to leave behind a vision of the world that you once worked with in order to embrace a new vision.

Again, though, embracing change and leaving things behind did not entail, for Jesus' earliest followers, a life of aimlessness. Following Jesus meant **reshaping** life (here's our 5th word) – its patterns, its priorities, its goals, to accord with the patterns, priorities and goals of the kingdom that had drawn near in Jesus. What that **reshaping** looked like for those Jesus called back then was unique and what that reshaping looks like today for each and every one of those Jesus calls will also be unique – there is no cookie cutter disciple of Jesus out there – we are a diverse bunch with many gifts and many callings. At the same time, despite the diversity of our callings in life, I do think that if we journey along with Jesus' first disciples, with Peter and Andrew, with James and John, as they walk with Jesus to Galilee and listen to him teaching and as they watch him heal the sick and care for the afflicted, we will begin to see one common calling and ministry that we share as disciples of Jesus: we are called to reshape our lives in order to join Jesus' ministry of “**mending**” the brokenness of our world (there's that 6th word!). Of course, that ministry of mending will often start with our own minds and hearts, with our own

¹ <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/amy-jill-levine-women-at-the-cross-and-the-tomb/13843886>

inner work that God calls us to, but it must progress outward too, to the work of mending the world around us.

Over the next several weeks, as we continue to listen and learn from Jesus through several of his parables about the Kingdom of God, I suspect that we will learn a lot about what embracing kingdom change looks like, and how it will call us to leave certain things behind, to reshape our lives, and to mend the broken within ourselves and within our world. So, there you have it. I guess I didn't stick to a true six-word sermon, but as we draw this time of reflection to a close, I want to help us take these six words with us -- **Embrace Kingdom change: leave, reshape, mend** – by using them in an embodied form of prayer. All of you should have received a lump of modelling clay and a bandage when you came in the sanctuary. If you did not, raise your hand and an usher can bring you one. Those worshipping at home, if you have your materials ready, take them out now. Why don't we begin together by holding the clay and have the bandage nearby – you are welcome to shape or form the clay if you like but you can keep it just as it is as well and that's just fine. In a few moments, I will invite you to join me in praying with this clay in your hand, and I will guide you along with some actions as we go.

Join me in prayer.

God who draws the kingdom near to us in Jesus, we are like this clay we hold. The shape you find us in today is varied – we come from many different places, with many different experiences. Over our lives, we have been shaped and formed by those experiences – some good and some bad – and by the world around us. We hear your call, in Jesus, to embrace a new world. We know that means leaving some things behind. God, you are the potter who can help identify in us what we must give up and what we must hold on to. Give us the wisdom to know what you are calling us to leave behind and give us the courage and the strength to do it.

I invite you now, if you like, to take a moment and consider what God might be calling you to leave behind at this point in your life. [Pause] If you like, you can take a piece of the clay off and set it beside you as a symbol of what God is calling you to leave behind as you embrace Jesus' call to change.

God who reshapes the world in Jesus, we are the clay, and you are the potter. We hear your call in Jesus to be reshaped, with new priorities and life patterns. Where you find us hardened and set in our ways, reshape us. Melt our heart of stone and mold us into the image of Jesus.

I invite you now to consider what newness God might be calling you to in your life. [Pause] If you like, you are welcome to reshape your piece of clay as a symbol of God reshaping you, giving you a new and vibrant identity.

God who mends the world in Jesus, we are the clay, and you are the potter. We are like pottery covered with various cracks, fractures, and scars. We hear your call to join you in your ministry of mending the world, but we also need to be mended. Mend us, God, and as you mend us, empower us to join you as you mend the world.

I invite you to consider what mending God might be doing in you and where God might be calling you to be a mender in the world. [Pause] If you like, you can also take your bandage and place it around your clay shape as a symbol of God mending you and empowering you to join God's ministry of healing for others.

God who draws near to us in Jesus, you are the potter, and we are the clay. We entrust ourselves to you.

AMEN.