

BASIC CHRISTIANITY 101¹
Mark 1: 9-20
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
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Ernest Hemingway wrote a famous short story called "The Capital of the World." Washington, DC seemed to be the capital of the world last Tuesday. Sometimes I feel like our worship service is the capital of the world when we consider how many nationalities are part of our congregation. In his short story Hemingway tells about a mother who traveled to Madrid looking for her son whose name was Paco. She placed an ad in the local paper: PACO MEET ME AT HOTEL MONTANA NOON WEDNESDAY ALL IS FORGIVEN MAMA. The next day the authorities had to muster a squadron of the national guard to disperse the mob of 800 young men named Paco who massed on the street in front of the hotel.²

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So we gather at a time of new beginnings- a new year, a new President, a new day. This is a good time to remind ourselves of the basics, the fundamentals of faith. It doesn't matter how sophisticated we get, or how complicated our thinking becomes, it is a gift to go back to the fundamentals of basic Christianity 101.

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² Ernest Hemingway, "The Capital of the World," in *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), pp. 29ff.

So here it is in this text from Mark's gospel. It is a calling to a new way of life, a calling to a change of heart which the early Christians described with a Greek word that is hardly translatable into English:

metanoia. Here is the way the writer of the gospel introduces the word:

*Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, **The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; metanoia and believe the good news.***

Did you notice that I did not even try to translate it? The English word "repent" has become so defiled as a translation of *metanoia* that the very idea of repentance has gotten a bad rap. *Metanoia* has very little to do with feeling sorry for getting caught with your hand in the cookie jar. It has even less to do with sorrow. In fact, when *metanoia* happens, it can be one of the most exhilarating, joyful experiences a person can have.

Imagine that you walk into this sanctuary burdened down with worry and torn up inside. You have had a tough week at home and at work. It doesn't seem to be getting any easier. But you managed to get dressed and stumble into church. Then some strange things began to happen.

As you speak to friends in the foyer and sit down in your pew, you feel a part of a long history of people who, like you, have entered this sanctuary with deep needs. You look around and notice the sheer loving

care and planning of this place of worship, faithfully provided for us by generations past. So even before anything is said, you already know that you are a part of something larger than your own feelings, something powerful, something life-changing. And even if you are a visitor in this place, you know that you are a part of a gathering of faith and hope and love.

Then the bells lifted their beautiful voice, and you are aware from the Order of Worship that it is organ music that was composed by Gabriel Fauré, a French composer in the early 20th century. So already you know that this gathering is bigger than just us, bigger than one nationality. Then you open the hymnbook to the first hymn, and you join in singing the words:

*Come away from rush and hurry to the stillness of God's peace;
From our vain ambition's worry, come to Christ to find release.
Come away from noise and clamor, life's demands and frenzied
pace;
Come to join the people gathered here to seek and find God's
face.*

Already something is happening to you.

The anthem seems just for you; the prayers and the silence speak their voice; the scriptures intone their words; the faces of the children remind you that this is a multi-generational gathering, and there seems to be a Voice behind the preacher's voice that is speaking as much to the preacher as it is to you. And when it is all over, you walk out of this place

the same person, but in a way a new person. Your old problems have not changed, but **you** have changed. You face the same challenges at home and at work, the same complex emotions and the same difficult dilemmas· but something has changed. When that happens, as it often does with us in worship, **that is *metanoia***.

Metanoia is not something you can order up on demand like a pizza delivered to your door. All the careful planning we can do in worship can't force it or make it happen. All we can do is to offer to God our best in worship, and then only God can serve up ***metanoia***.

When Jesus says in our text, *...the kingdom of God has come near, metanoia and believe the good news*, he was saying that when ***metanoia*** happens to you, believe it! It is good news, great news! And it is real! Others would later describe it as a new birth, or a conversion, but however it is described, it happens, even to the most educated, the most sophisticated people. And it happens repeatedly throughout our lives, because we need it repeatedly.

II

Now that's basic Christianity 101. But the writer doesn't stop after identifying ***metanoia***. He follows it with a little story to illustrate how it works in real life. It can happen in front of a computer screen or in the middle of a

classroom. With the first disciples, it happened in the midst of their normal workweek. They were ordinary fishermen, engaged in the major industry of the region. They were like time-clock factory workers, just going about their business. They were non-degreed, ordinary people.

And in Mark's characteristically terse way, Jesus summons them with the simple call, *Follow me*. There is no great theological system that Jesus calls them to swallow and digest. They are not asked to claim any particular spot on the political spectrum. They are not even required to be politically correct. Neither are they asked to wait until all their theological questions are answered before they become his disciples.

He simply says, *Follow me*. Their beliefs are still not fully formed, and there is plenty of room for unanswered questions. One of the most unfortunate misconceptions about Christianity is that to be a Christian you have to have your theology all figured out and your questions answered. But this little illustrative story about basic Christianity reminds us that to be a Christian is not so much a solution to a problem as it is an adventure in the midst of any problem. It is following a way, the Way of Christ, and answers to your questions may or may not be discovered along that Way, but you know that you are not alone.

We follow Jesus, not because we decide that all other ways are totally bankrupt. We know better than that. We follow Jesus because we are taken with fascination by this one life, and the more we follow him, the more we are devoted to him. This fascination with and devotion to Jesus is nothing to be embarrassed about in a multi-religious culture like ours, where there are more Muslims than Episcopalians. Truth is, we have good reason to be embarrassed about the behavior of some who call themselves Christian. But every great religion has more than enough reason to be embarrassed for similar reasons.

III

An article in the *Christian Science Monitor* tells about an extraordinary conference that took place on the campus of Oregon State University. One thousand of the world's leading religious scholars participated in this conference. The agenda for this conference of academics was very unusual. These scholars were asked to speak from the heart about their own personal experience of God.

Now, if you have ever been in the classroom of a religious scholar, you can appreciate what a challenge that was! These scholars have great experience in speaking in the third person about God. They can quote other authorities verbatim. They can present all the arguments for the

existence of God from the great thinkers of history. They can wax eloquent about the ramifications of Descartes' philosophical dictum, "I think, therefore I am." They can spend hours on Pascal's Great Wager. They can spend a whole semester on the philosophical systems of Spinoza and Kant and Hegel. They can unpack the challenges to God from Feuerbach and Marx and Freud and Nietzsche. This is all familiar terrain for religious scholars.

But think how terrifying it must have been for religious scholars to step out from all their footnotes and quotation marks, and speak in the first person of their own beliefs and their own experiences of God. One of the major speakers at the conference was Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa. He spoke of how early in his life he tried hard to impress God— to succeed, to achieve, to do good, in order that God would accept him and love him. He said that he worked himself into a frazzle trying to impress God, seeking to make himself loveable to God. His view of God was that God was always on the lookout to catch him doing something wrong, ready to pounce and say, "Gotcha!"

Then he spoke of what a great relief it was— a liberation, he called it— to learn and accept the truth about God's grace and the incredible love God has for us. He said that it was something that just grasped him and

possessed him so that all his sermons and addresses during the struggle for human rights in South Africa were really about this one central truth and its implications. He said that he is still bowled over by the implications of the one central truth that God loves us.

Here is the way he concludes: "The one truth is this: God loves me. Full stop. The initiative belongs to God. It is not as if God were reacting or responding to something. No, the glory and the wonder, as St. John puts it, are *not that we first loved God, but that God loved us first*, and everything, just everything, flows from that fact."³

IV

Friends, this is not a time for fancy theology; it's not a time for sophisticated arguments and complicated reasoning. It is a time for the basics. We have the rest of the year for speculations. But as for now, I ask you a serious question: have you been intellectualizing and rationalizing and psychologizing religion for so long that you have forgotten the basics? Have you forgotten what Desmond Tutu was talking about- that God really loves you?

And do you remember the first time you heard the call to follow the way of Jesus? That would require a long memory for some of us; and for

³ Desmond Tutu, "Getting to the Prodigal God," *The Christian Science Monitor*, February 24, 2000, p. 16.

others, it is a contemporary and compelling call. I invite you to respond to that call with a simple, direct, and elementary answer: say yes! Yes to the call to follow Christ. And then let us embrace our faith once again with all the joy and seriousness embedded in the words of our text for today: *The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; **metanoia**, and believe in the good news.*