

Quitting and Metanoia

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Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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“When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.” From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea— for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.” - Matthew 4:12-23

A New York Times feature last Monday was titled, ‘I Quit: Stories of People Who Walked Away.’ Twenty separate essays, many in the first-person, told about quitting a job, or quitting a band, quitting dating apps, a presidential candidate who quit the race, quitting the priesthood, and more. In the introduction, the editor asks, “Is there a more tantalizing two-word phrase than ‘I quit’? It can feel exhilarating to the person saying it, crushing to the person hearing it and envy inducing to anyone learning of it ... Quitting can be an impulsive act of emancipation or a more tortured step toward a better life.” (NYT, January 20, 2020)

I wonder what four fishermen — Peter, Andrew, James and John — may have written if they had shared their stories in a similar collection:

“One fateful day, Jesus of Nazareth came along and changed everything. We quit our livelihoods. We quit the homes where some of us had lived our whole lives. We quit the familiar creak of our boats, that whoosh as we cast our nets, that hopeful rush as we hauled them in. There we were, doing what we always did, when Jesus shouted out to us: ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.’ Some of us thought he was joking—at first. But we all had this sense that he saw right into us.”

Imagine if these same four ex-fishermen wrote their ‘I Quit’ essays years or decades later: after those three exhilarating mission years in Galilee, after the somber turning toward Jerusalem, the waving of palms, the betrayal, the ghastly torture and death of the sometimes enigmatic One who both clearly loved the world and yet who seemed determined to rise above its broken heart.

“At first, we thought we knew where it was all going. But more than once we have had to quit our old ideas. Who is this Messiah? What is his mission? And of course, what is my place in it? And then—resurrection. Forget about it. I mean, of course it was great, life-changing, everything. But it was also another upheaval. And all these years later? Well, if there’s one thing that we all know now, it’s that following Jesus — really following him? — it never ends. We all know that he is calling us — all of us — to ultimately quit the world, and our attachments to it, and our fears, as he did. But there doesn’t seem to be a one-size-fits-all way of doing that. Each of us is still figuring it out for ourselves.”

Not all quitting is spiritually significant or redemptive. But religious language is peppered with words like renunciation, sacrifice, asceticism, fasting and celibacy—words that imply, commend or sanctify quitting.

Quitting something for the sake of God is often a solitary matter. But quitting may sometimes be undertaken by, or urged upon, a larger community of faith. Take today's epistle reading, for instance. Paul urges an entire local church to quit their discord: "*I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose ...*" Some of you might agree that we at Ascension have quit much, even if not all, of the sorrowful rancor and the eye-for-an-eye behavior of just a few years ago. Thanks be to God.

On another front here at Ascension, Susan Schlough never used the words 'I Quit' when she felt last spring that it was time to step down from ten years of conscientious food pantry leadership. This was largely her personal call. But I also noticed, and am thankful for, how Susan 'quit' in a way that showed care and support for the good of the whole and the ongoing vitality of this important outreach ministry.

Also in the past year, we at Ascension collectively quit the historic prohibition of women clergy at the altar here. I acknowledge those who may have wished otherwise. I also thank so many of you who made this a positive transition and who have graciously welcomed the first women priests and their gifts here.

In these and other instances, quitting may be a dynamic and even a necessary feature of responding to a new vision or chapter to which God may be calling us. In this context, let me mention one more religious quitting word - *repent*. Not only does Jesus use the word in today's gospel, but here in Matthew, *repent* is the very first word in the public ministry of Jesus: "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.*"

Many Bible scholars want you and me to know that what we now typically mean by 'repent' is not what was meant by the Greek word *metanoia* or its derivatives, one of which is used here. Taking inventory and quitting bad behaviors that defy God and harm one's self or others *may* be a part of *metanoia*. But the original primary meaning seems to have been mainly about fundamentally changing one's mind, heart and life. Knowing this may allow us to see that opening line of Jesus through a different lens: "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.*"

"Here, let me show you a different way," Jesus is saying. "It's a divine way, a way out of your sorrow and desperation, a way of genuine hope and enduring love. I'll tell you up front, though: If you feel drawn to this divine way, you may find yourselves quitting some of your old ways of being.

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

A few of you recently asked if I planned to present a vision for the future of Ascension for our annual meeting today. I suppose the answer is no and yes. I don't have any bold new programs or direction to propose. My own primary vision for us is God's vision for us, the Body of Christ, as we confess it whenever we gather here and share in Word and Sacrament. And I pray that different facets of that vision are faithfully held us for us by my male and female fellow priests who share in the ministry of preaching here.

The Collect for today could be seen as one more reference to that vision. (BCP p. 215) What if God is right this moment imagining that you and I are the answer to that prayer? What would we need to quit in order to '*answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ*'? What God-given *metanoia* may already be standing on our seashore, calling out to us? What if we were to respond in such a way '*that we and the whole world may perceive the glory of [God's] marvelous works*'? Amen.