

## *What Will It Take to Change Our Minds?*

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The Community Church of Sebastopol  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – June 14, 2020

Matthew 9: 35 – 10:16

### I.

Our summer worship theme emerged from a book, “Beyond the Offering Plate: A Holistic Approach to Stewardship.”

Stewardship can mean a variety of things, but I’d like to propose these meanings: caretaking, safeguarding, and protecting.

For me, the most compelling chapter in the book is written by Margaret P. Aymer, a woman of color who serves as Associate Professor of New Testament at Austin Theological Seminary.

In her chapter, Dr. Aymer writes, “I was originally to write about ‘the stewardship of privilege.’ However, I come to reject the suggestion that privilege be stewarded. Instead... I believe that Christian faith calls us to the stewardship of *incarnation*... [which] serves as an ethical critique of (un)earned societal privilege.”

Professor Aymer’s mind was changed in the course of writing her chapter, and her change of mind yielded the overall theme for our summer worship: “Stewardship of Incarnation.”

If that sounds theologically heady, let me suggest that Stewardship of Incarnation could mean “Taking Care of Bodies” or “Safeguarding Each Other’s Unique Enfleshment.”

Stewardship of Incarnation also means Black Lives Matter.

### II.

Today we bless seven young people of our congregation who graduated from high school this past week.

Along with their parents we’ve watched with pride as Isaiah, Chloe, Ava, Rory, Jessica, Jane, and Margaux have grown up in our presence.

Never did we imagine that their commencement from high school would be marked by a global viral pandemic.

And yet here they are, making the leap with our blessing while trusting that the Holy Spirit will guide their lives in every moment.

Their education will continue in the years to come, both in college and in the living of their lives.

But what will be the purpose of that education?

Many a commencement address has sought to convince graduates that the primary purpose of education is not to land a well-paying job but to change the world. Some have ignored that distinction and others have heeded it. Perhaps the sweet spot is finding a way to get paid well for doing what you love. But there is a deeper purpose for education beyond developing marketable skills or acquiring sought-after knowledge. Education at its best teaches you how to learn, and how to think, and how to keep your thinking clear though nimble so that you can develop your thinking, and even change your mind, over time.

### III.

Having returned to the story of Jesus' ministry as narrated by the writer of the gospel of Matthew, in today's reading we hear that Jesus goes on tour. As he travels throughout the region of Galilee, he does two things: He teaches and he heals. His teaching consists in sharing, with anyone who will hear, a vision of God's kingdom, or kin-dom, in which justice prevails by placing the needs of the poor, the bereft, the marginalized, and the vulnerable at the center of every decision. Jesus' healing consists in crossing social barriers meant to keep the status quo in place.

Jesus teaches and he heals. But he doesn't go it alone. According to Matthew, great nonviolent crowds gather for these demonstrations. And his cohort of disciples is there. He looks at the great crowds and has compassion for them. He does not turn them away. Instead he summons his disciples and sends them out to do all the things he has been doing. Lest you think this is a stellar group of individuals, think again. They are a hodgepodge group of fishermen, tax collectors, and other troublemakers. They are not the A-Team. Nowhere close. Not the B-Team nor the C-Team. Jesus says to his D-Team, "Time to get busy."

Do you hear what education looks like so far in this story? Education, for Jesus, is embodied practice. It means traveling beyond one's comfort zone. It means sharing a vision of what is possible but not yet realized. It means healing divisions by putting your body in the vicinity of other bodies. It means mentoring and sending people who may be unqualified and unprepared and yet who are called to a moment such as this.

#### IV.

When I picture Jesus and the crowds, I can't help but connect it to the protests happening in hundreds of towns and cities across our country and world proclaiming that Black Lives Matter.

These demonstrations of what I'll call "village power" have been led primarily by people of color and often by young people.

To witness such an outpouring is inspiring, yes, but it is also gut-wrenching and heartbreaking because these protests force all of us to see how systemic racism is woven into the very fabric of our societal institutions and our collective conscience.

Why should it take a spate of deaths of black people to force white people to face the racial disparities entrenched in all corners of our society, including in our own towns and churches and families and individual habits of mind?

And what is to keep this latest uprising from simmering down again into a new, but all-too-familiar status quo?

What will it take to change our minds?

#### V.

Lest we lift up Jesus too quickly as a moral example, notice the verse in this morning's reading where Jesus tells his commissioned disciples, "Don't go to the pagans and don't go to the Samaritans. Just go to the people who look and talk like you do. Just go to the House of Israel."

I don't know about you, but that's not the kind of thing I like to hear coming out of Jesus' mouth.

I like my Jesus broadly inclusive, thank you very much.

Perhaps at this point in his ministry, he is doing the work of getting his own house in order, so to speak.

As protests swell around our country, black leaders welcome a broad coalition of participants, but many are quick to remind sympathetic white people that this kind of activism has been going on for generations, often without the support of white people, and that just showing up to a protest or two doesn't exempt you from doing the lifelong work of eradicating racial bias that is woven into the way white Americans think of themselves.

So maybe Jesus has a larger plan in mind.

Let's tidy up the House of Israel before we share the good news with everyone else.

Or maybe Jesus himself is due for a change of mind.

Maybe, as Matthew tells it, Jesus' ministry, while radical and transformative for some, is still smaller than what God intends.

In chapter 15, a Canaanite woman – you could think of her a marginalized woman of color – speaks truth to Jesus’ power and shames him into acknowledging his privilege.

This encounter causes Jesus to change his mind, to expand his ministry, to broaden his vision and application of the kin-dom in a radical and expansive direction.

## VI.

Today our worship contains a confessional mode.

In a prayer of confession, we name the ways in which we have failed.

We admit when we have gotten it wrong.

In that spirit, I’d like to share with you some ways that I’ve gotten it wrong and how my mind has changed.

- I used to think that racism was mainly a problem that people of color had to deal with. I was wrong. My mind has changed. While people of color are the primary victims of racism, the problem was created by white people like me who need to be a part of dismantling it.
- I used to think that incidences of white violence against black people were unfortunate aberrations. I was wrong. My mind has changed. I now see that a program of white violence has existed for at least 400 years and that it morphs and tries to become respectable or justified, but it is always an act of terror meant to keep people of color in a subordinate state.
- I used to think that electing our first black president meant we were on the fast track toward racial equality. I was wrong. My mind has changed. Black people died violently and pointlessly even when the president was black. And now those 8 years of some progress have been followed by 4 years of strong white backlash in which every white person is implicated.
- I used to think that as long as my church “welcomed everyone,” we could not be accused of being racist. I was wrong. My mind has changed. Racial bias infuses our culture, including our church’s culture. We have yet to explore and name the implicit biases that dictate what stories we tell, what songs we sing, what voices we hear, what bodies we see, and what sermons we preach.

## VII.

What will it take to change our minds?

Someone once said that we don’t so much think our way into new ways of acting, we act our way into new ways of thinking.

In this way, Jesus’ embodied practices can provide direction for us.

Jesus went into the villages. He spent time with people, shared good news, overcame divisions. What would it mean for the members of this church to “go into the villages”? What might we learn about “village power”?

Jesus gathered a group of people willing to be sent to do the work. What would it mean for Community Church to take up Jesus' work of teaching justice and offering healing by overcoming falsely constructed boundaries?

Jesus might have gotten it wrong, but he changed his mind. What would it mean for those of us who follow Jesus to look at our own thinking, confess when we've gotten it wrong, and commit to changing our minds?

High school graduates, we hope you know how precious you are to us.

We affirm that you are God's beloved, and you are our beloveds.

We are now sending you into a world beautiful and broken.

Be stewards of your minds.

Keep them clear and confident, yet always pliable and open.

As we emerge out of this pandemic, put your bodies in proximity to other bodies.

Seek out difference. Seek out discomfort. Seek out disruption.

Act your way into new ways of thinking.

Admit when you get it wrong.

Be ready to change your minds.

And when you do, come back and tell us how it happened.

Amen.