

“Inviting, Transforming, and Sending”

Mark 1.14–20

The Rev. Hal Chorpenning, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 25 January 2009

Imagine yourself at the place of your employment, whether it’s an office, a classroom, an assembly line, a construction site, taking care of kids, or even a lakeshore. You are doing the things you typically do, minding your own business, and then some itinerant preacher comes up to you and asks you to leave your work behind (which I’m sure sounds good some days!) and to leave your family behind (which also sounds good some days!) and to follow him. Now, if this itinerant preacher is Ted Haggard, you’re more than likely to say, “Get lost, Ted!” But, what if this person is the most charismatic, challenging, grounded person you’ve ever met? What if you just couldn’t take your eyes off him, because he exudes some sort of energy...energy that gives you hope that everything in your world – and in the entire world – is about to change? Can you get yourself to leave your professional and financial and familiar security behind and say, “Yes?”

Mark’s story of Jesus and the disciples can be an illustration for us, not of what an idealized life of discipleship looks like, but what the realities of being a follower of Jesus looks like. The disciples, like us, often seem to miss the point and don’t quite measure up, whether it’s fighting for the best seat at the table with Jesus or fleeing for their lives after Jesus is arrested. But, here at the beginning of their journey, they do get it right by saying “Yes” to Jesus’ invitation, leaving security behind and starting on a journey that will change everything.

Six years ago, when we were in the process of strategic planning for Plymouth, we re-examined our mission statement, and we amended it to be more in line with what our congregation needs to be about. We turned to the words of the UCC’s former director of research, Kirk Hadaway, for a paradigm that looked at the way churches focused on discipleship behave. In his book, *Behold, I Do a New Thing*, Hadaway saw three stages of development for modern-day disciples. There are old-fashioned and more contemporary descriptions of the three phases. If I said the words, “Evangelism, Conversion, and Mission,” some of us would be very comfortable and know just what they mean. But, for a younger generation and for those of us who grew up outside the church, those terms are laden with baggage, and that may come as a surprise to some of us.

“Evangelism” may sound like a forceful assertion that our way is the only way. “Conversion” may seem as if it’s a one-time experience – a switch that gets thrown to turn you into a Christian. And even “mission” may have connotations of the Spanish missions and virtual enslavement of Indians in California.

So, we opted for some words that may be more meaningful and easier to appropriate. But that doesn’t mean that these words are any less meaningful or powerful.

Interestingly, each of these three ideas is contained in the brief story of the call of these disciples in Mark’s gospel. They are **invited**: “Follow me!” They are called to **transformation**: “the kingdom of God has come near: repent!” And they are **sent** (or at least take the first steps) with Jesus: “They left their nets and followed him.”

As a visual learner, I often do better when I’m able to picture something, whether it’s a photo or a bar chart, so I included a little diagram in your bulletin, which illustrates our church mission statement: “It is our mission to worship God and help make God’s realm visible in the lives of people, individually and collectively, especially as it is set forth in the life, teachings, death, and living presence of Jesus Christ. We do this by ...

inviting ... transforming ... [and] sending.” I’m going to talk a bit about each of these aspects of **our** journey together as Jesus’ disciples today.



I want you to think back into your past and try and remember the first time somebody invited you into the church. It could have been your mom and dad dragging you out of bed on a Sunday morning, or it could have been a friend who invited you to Plymouth for the first time this week. *When was it for you? And who extended the invitation?* And I invite you to offer a brief, silent prayer of thanksgiving for that person or those persons, who invited you on this journey. *[pause]* And now think of how you wound up here at Plymouth: did you find us in the Yellow Pages or on our website? Are you a lifelong member of the UCC and when you moved to Fort Collins found the only United Church congregation in town? A few of you actually grew up in this church and have been lifetime members. But, I suspect that most of us had an invitation from someone, a friend or colleague who attended Plymouth and said, “Hey, great things are happening at my church, and I think you’d like it. Why don’t you join me some Sunday?”

We are a different kind of church from many in Fort Collins, and in the parlance of my former profession, “We have a well-defined and distinctive market niche.” We know what we stand for: doing our best to make the realm of God visible, and creating a congregation that invites people to embark on a journey of faith, no matter their background. The intellectual integrity of our Congregational tradition informs our faith, and our commitment to social justice is centuries old. We are, in the words of Ron Buford, “the denomination that gets there first.”

So, when was the last time you invited a friend or neighbor to church? When was the last time you talked up something going on in your congregation at work or at the fitness club, whether it was the Alternative Giving Fair or a special service? It isn’t that we are the only church in town, or that we are the right church for everyone in Fort Collins. Rather, we have a certain *charism* or a gift as a congregation, and Plymouth is a gift worth sharing. So, think about how you can extend an invitation to someone visiting Plymouth, and be sure you make our visitors feel welcome.



So, how many church members does it take to change a lightbulb? *What do you mean, “change!?”* Nobody, really likes change, but we are called by Christ himself to a journey of transformation.

One of my favorite Greek words in the New Testament is one of my least favorite English words in the New Testament: *metanoia* and repentance. You all know what paranoia is, and the latter part of the word is *noia*, which comes from the Greek *nous*, which means *mind* or metaphorically, *heart*. The prefix *meta* means to change, as is metamorphosis, changing shape. So, *metanoia* is a change of heart or mind. A better English equivalent than repentance is *transformation*. But, let’s just say, *metanoia*.

Now, I want to acknowledge what a wonderful, talented group of individuals comprise this congregation. You all are bright, successful, aware, and accomplished. And many of you – especially the liberal Democrats among us – think that you are enlightened and have arrived, and there is no need for transformation, *thank you very much!*

I know just about all of you, and I have met to meet anyone – myself included – who is not in need of *metanoia*. And it takes some humility to look at the rough edges of our souls that still need to be smoothed a bit. Transformation looks different for each of us. I know people in this congregation who have had moments of *metanoia* in their

thinking about gays and lesbian, in their faith in God and Christ, and in sharing their financial wealth to ensure that our ministries and mission remain vital. *Change is difficult!*

Paul says that we are dying and rising each day with Christ, and there are parts of each of us that need to die off and other aspects of our lives that need new life. None of us arrives fully formed, that's why we need this community to help shape our lives and our faith. In my upcoming *Placard* article, I diverged from prose and included a tongue-in-cheek quiz to test your Spiritual Fitness, so see how you score and if it reveals anything to you.

I want you to sing with me the short song I taught at the beginning of worship and think about what *metanoia* you are being called to. I'll sing it through once, and then you can join me as we sing it through together three times: "Take me, take me as I am. Summon forth what I might be. Set your seal upon my hear, and live in me."



What good is *metanoia*, if you just sit there and enjoy your own sense of enlightenment? That is not what Christianity is about! It's about getting beyond your front door, leaving your fishing nets and your self-interest behind, and sometimes doing things for the sake of your faith that my scandalize your family. Imagine what old Zebedee thought as he saw his two adult sons wandering away from his fishing business!

We need to move beyond ourselves, if we are to find the wholeness that Christ calls us to. Some of us do that by interviewing people for the Homelessness Prevention Initiative or serving lunch at the Mission or repairing houses on the Navajo Reservation or building an accessible playground for someone else's children. And we do it by extending our reach through our giving to Our Church's Wider Mission.

I used to think that *ministry* is what happens within a congregation and *mission* is what happens beyond our front doorstep. But my experience at Plymouth has changed my mind, as I see our mission coming right here to Plymouth through the groups who use our building. Our mission includes providing a home for RESTORE, a teen restorative justice program; for developmentally disabled adults through Foothills Gateway; for Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays; and for 30 other groups. Our building enables our mission in ways few of us were able to foresee.

As theologian Emil Brunner once said, "The church exist as mission as a fire exists by burning." And we all need to catch that fire and ensure that our mission – our sending – reaches its full potential. There is much more that needs to be done!

Will you pray with me? God, help us to live more fully into our faith as we leave our nets behind, following Christ. Amen.