

“Repent and Follow Me”

Matthew 4:12-23

Third Sunday after Epiphany at the Meriden Congregational Church

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- I. This has been quite a weekend, hasn't it? For our country of course but dare I say for our own hearts and minds and spirits, too? With President Trump's inauguration on Friday and all the fanfare that went along with that and then, yesterday, with the Women's March on Washington as well as in hundreds of cities around the U.S. and the world. Some of you, I know, participated in one these powerful and empowering marches. Who here went to Concord or Montpelier, Boston (Jamesons) or Washington (Mary Boyle, Perotti family) or other cities?? So all around it's been an epic sort of weekend, we might say, with lots that our spirits have been holding and a whole spectrum of feelings in our hearts I would guess, so many thoughts, questions, and emotions, perhaps grief and mourning, excitement, worry, fear, anger, euphoria, solidarity, hope. . .what else? What else are we feeling in our hearts this morning? Take a moment to center down and be mindful of what's inside. What's in your heart this morning as you've taken in all that's been happening these past two days??

- II. However we voted in the 2016 election (and, as a church family, we voted both red and blue and some not at all), we are united now in 2017 having elected a human being to the highest governmental position with some values and behaviors that are at odds with our faith, like those of truth-telling and respect for the dignity of other human beings and for the integrity of the earth. I certainly don't pretend to know much about foreign or domestic policy, economics or infrastructure, but I do recognize—as we all do--when a person or group of people is being insulted or falsehoods are disguised as truth. These values and behaviors are not presidential deal-breakers for everyone. But for those for who they are, how do we live as faithfully as we can with this new presidential administration? What are we to do when we hear the slogan, “Make America Great Again” (when this may be at the painful expense of many) or “American First?” (when our faith

reminds us that “the first shall be last”). How do we manage when we hear these two very different calls—one from our faith and one from the leader of our country? And how does our faith call us to live in these uncertain and disconcerting times?

- III. Our simple Bible story this morning of Jesus’ call to the earliest of disciples, as they were fishing and mending their nets along the Sea of Galilee, was a simple call, basically, “repent and follow me.” To “repent” is nothing more complicated than to “turn back to God, to reorient oneself toward the Source of All Life and Love.” If Jesus were to call us *today* to repent, what would he be calling us to turn away from? Perhaps our greed, egotism, pride, racism, sexism, homophobia, elitism, Islamophobia, or any other manner of “other-izing” another human being. “Leave those nets behind,” he would say, “and follow me where I will help you learn how to truly connect with all kinds of people, heart to heart.”
- IV. I must admit, since Friday, I have felt somewhat unmoored by the reality of what is happening in our country now and my concern for the future of basic values such as truth and universal love. So for re-grounding during this time, I’ve turned toward some of those I trust who try to live these faith-inspired values,

like **Nancy Taylor**, the pastor at Old South Church in Boston, who wrote last week, *“I will join the Women’s March on Saturday as a follower of Jesus and in witness to a way of life that challenges Caesar. A way of life wherein might does not make right. . .A way of life wherein riches cannot make you good or great. Wherein justice matters above one’s ability to purchase it. Wherein humility is esteemed for its wisdom”*

and like our **U.C.C. national ministers** who wrote shortly in their pastoral letter to all of us after the election, *“We. . .call upon the church to seek a pathway that envisions a just world for all. Those who celebrate this election must show a humility that honors the pain of those whose dreams were dashed by the outcome. Those who grieve must find a courage and hope found in a faith not in earthly power, but in the redemptive love of our Risen Christ. It is with this humility and faith that we can fulfill our mission: to build a just world for all. We stand in the face of fear and hate and proclaim that ‘love wins!’ We rise up and respond to public derision*

of ‘the other’ with a full embrace of and warm welcome for all God’s beautiful children. We confront the injustices of the powerful with a steady drumbeat of justice”

And like the **Sisters of Mercy**—good former Catholic that I am—who have adopted a specific calendar of daily prayer for President Trump’s first one hundred days in office, today’s prayer is *“for our personal commitment to make changes that protect our Earth”*

And **Jim Wallis**, senior editor of Sojourners Magazine, who wrote this past Thursday that *“Now is a Time for Faith to Flourish.”* And he outlines two clear and critical roles for faith communities. First, he writes, *“we are instructed to always protect vulnerable and marginalized people. We are always to include and welcome ‘the other’. . . a unifying commitment for those on different political sides to join together to defend those who feel and are most vulnerable as a new politics come to Washington, D.C.”* and, second, *“faith communities could become safe and sacred spaces for deeper conversations about race in our history and in our communities today. We should talk about our original sin, how it still lingers, and what repentance from our continuing racial sins might look like.”* Wallis concludes, *“And perhaps the value that our country needs most right now, in an age of almost complete cynicism about politics, is the power and promise of hope. We can decide to spend our time, energy, and the gifts of our lives to make this a better world—for those around us, especially for those on the edges, and to be good stewards of the creation itself. That’s who people of faith are supposed to be; that is what we are supposed to do. And there is no better time to do that than right now. No matter what politics says and does, it is always time for faith to flourish and more forward.”*

- V. And last but by no means least, for re-grounding during this time, I turn to our church family—to all those of you who marched yesterday, to those of you who hold up “Black Lives Matter” signs every Wednesday morning, to the United Valley Interfaith Project’s initiative to reach out to people in our area who feel marginalized in any way, to the Upper Valley Refugee Working Group that Ed Cousineau and others are involved in with their “Light the Way Refugee Event,” was also this past weekend, and especially to all

of you who every day seek to repent, to turn toward the Source of Love and to follow in this way of love.

- VI. Friends, this clearly is a time to repent, to reorient and to recommit ourselves to the pastoral and prophetic values of our faith, both respecting and listening deeply to the concerns and stories of others who are different from us, with humility repenting of those things that separate us from God and one another, and holding ourselves and others (including our president) accountable when we stray from the values of justice and love. May we put down our nets of all that entangles us and together walk the path where God beckons us to be faith-filled witnesses to the immense and transforming power of love in our world. Can I hear an Amen? Amen!