

I don't know about you, but I love the Olympics. I'm super excited that the Winter Olympics start in less than two weeks, and maybe this storm has helped prepare us for that. But one of the more recent additions to the Winter Olympics that I've seen at the last couple anyways, are the speed skating relays. Have you seen these? It is traditional speed skating, where they race around a track, but now there are relays. And how they do this is kinda cool. One person from each team is out there, and they race around for a few laps. And then when its time for the next skater in the relay, the next skater moves out there on the ice and slowly gets started, and then the current racer actually comes up behind the new person and physically pushes them to tag them in. There's no baton or anything, just a push from behind, and then they're off. Watch for it in a couple weeks, its kinda cool.

Its an image that came to mind when I read our gospel this week. John the Baptist has been doing great ministry out in the wilderness. He proclaims, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!" But today's reading marks the transition from John to Jesus. We hear that John is arrested, and Jesus begins his ministry with that exact same message, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!" Both Jesus and John are about changing hearts and minds – repenting. The time has come because the kingdom of heaven has come near. And I want to focus for a minute on this transition because I do think Jesus gets a little push, like those speed skaters. The way that Matthew tells the story, the thing that pushes Jesus into ministry, the spark or the impetus, the thing that really causes Jesus to start his ministry is the fact that he heard that John the Baptist has been arrested. Matthew doesn't get into the gory details at the moment, but we know them, right? We know why John was arrested, right? We know that John got in trouble with the king. He had been engaging in some good ol' fashioned government protest, criticism, calling his king to account for his immoral actions, maybe embarrassing him or harassing him because he wasn't following God's laws or God's way. The king – and his family - didn't like that one bit, so the king had John arrested, thrown in prison. And its interesting to think about that in Matthew's gospel, the ministry of Jesus is bookended by state sanctioned violence. Jesus starts his ministry when John is arrested, and we know that John is eventually executed. Jesus' ministry concludes when he himself is arrested and eventually executed. It seems like there is something about the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God coming near that makes earthy kingdoms and governments and powers quite nervous... so nervous that they get violent against their own people. And despite this abuse of power by the authorities, the story of Jesus shows us who really gets the final word, who really has the final victory, who really has the power. Violence is not the way. Corruption and abuse of power is not the way. Immorality is not the way. Crucifixion and death and murder is not the way. It may seem powerful and it may get our attention and make us afraid, but all that stuff meets its match on Good Friday at the cross. Because on Easter Sunday, Jesus' resurrection shows us that there is another way, a better way – the way of Jesus. Jesus' way is the way that will bring us life. Jesus' way is the way that bring flourishing and hope and healing. Jesus' way is the way to build community and love and grace. Jesus' way is what brings life out of death and offers salvation to the world, to each one of us. Jesus calls us to repent, to change our hearts and minds from the

violence of the kingdoms of the world. Jesus proclaims that the kingdom of heaven has come near and it is this kingdom that will endure for eternity. This is the kingdom that we are invited into, even on this side of heaven.

And so, long before the cross, before that final bookend, before that Easter victory, Jesus needs to recruit his team. And that's the other part of our reading today – the calling of the first disciples. “Come, follow me and I will make you fish for people.” You know, I've always thought this passage had an evangelical bent to it, like “Go, catch people for Jesus!” And that is there. It certainly is. But I learned recently that there might be more to this fishing metaphor than we typically talk about, that Jesus might've actually had something else in mind when he calls us to fish for people. There happens to be a handful of fishing images in the Old Testament, especially among the prophets. Jeremiah (16:16), Ezekiel (29:4), and Amos (4:2) all talk about fishing, but it is not an evangelical, make more disciples kind of image. Instead, in these prophets, fishing becomes a picture of God's coming justice. God is going to fish out the injustice, grab & fish out the king or the Pharaoh or the wealthy & powerful who oppress the poor. The prophets say things like God is going to put hooks in your jaws and drag you out and fling you into the wilderness, either leaving you to die (as in Ezekiel) or pay you double for the sins you caused (as in Jeremiah). And I think of my own fishing days, when I would snag a big ol' catfish and, pull it out and fling it onto the bank to get a good look at it, and deal with better... and, you know, then chop it up and eat it. Matthew is so rich in using Old Testament imagery, I can't imagine that he didn't have at least some of this prophetic justice imagery in mind as Jesus was calling those first disciples. Fishing for people meant hooking and yanking out those who were doing injustice, those who were abusing their power, those like King Herod who were arresting John the Baptist and leaning into violence. Theologian Ched Meyers says it like this, “This was Jesus' invitation for common folks to join Jesus in his struggle to overturn the existing order of power and privilege.” Sometimes, when you fish out the predators, fish out the bullies, fish out the tyrants, it allows everyone else to flourish and live a little easier, with a little less fear, and little more joy and peace. Maybe this is what Jesus means when he says that the Kingdom of Heaven has come near. Maybe we need a little more injustice fished out of our world today.

One last thing to note about this story in particular is why Jesus goes to Galilee in the first place. Matthew seems to imply Jesus went there deliberately. It probably wasn't where John was baptizing people or doing his ministry, but Jesus, when he gets tagged in, pushed into the race so to speak, he deliberately goes to the land of Zebulun & Naphtali to do this fishing work and to recruit his fishermen. It's a land with a lot of history, a place and a people familiar with occupation and oppression by powerful governments – whether it was by the Assyrians or the Babylonians or the Herods or the Romans... and evidently, the people there – the Galileans – they were feisty. Josephus, an ancient Jewish writer, wrote this, “The Galileans were ever fond of innovation, and by nature disposed to changes, and delighted in seditions.” They delighted in seditions. Jesus starts his ministry under the cloud of state violence and in order to welcome in his new kingdom, he goes to a place and a people who delight in seditions. Later on, Josephus

adds, “The Galileans have never been destitute of courage.” Jesus goes looking for courageous people who might be willing to help him start something new, something that might need to be able to stand up against violence or a power-hungry, oppressive government, a group of people who can identify & fish out injustice... a group of people that comes to be known as the Church.

In less than two weeks, we will watch that Olympic torch do a little parade through northern Italy. And a flame will be passed from one runner to the next, to the next. And each runner will be responsible for carrying the light to the next runner. Jesus got the push in the relay from John. He carried the light to some pretty dark places, including the land of Zebulun & Naphtali, Galilee of the Gentiles. And along the way, Jesus recruited others to help, called them run alongside him, people of great courage and who could be a little spicy. And he heals them and feeds them and teaches them and encourages them... and he eventually dies for them... And then he hands them the flame, quite literally at Pentecost. And it becomes their turn. The gospel, the good news, the inbreaking of the Kingdom of Heaven becomes their task, their purpose, their responsibility as the Church. And for 2,000 years, that torch has been passed from generation to generation. And we are now the ones carrying it. We are the ones who must steward the good news of God, the love and grace and mercy that Jesus so freely offered. It is our job now. We, as a Church must share that light with others. We must share the light and love of Christ with our family, your friends, your neighbors. We, as the Church, must share that light and love of Christ with our part of the world, with our community, maybe with the folks at the hospital, maybe with some students on campus, maybe with the folks walking up and down the street, maybe with folks downtown. With or without a full time called pastor, that responsibility, that task, and that flame of the Holy Spirit it is now ours. And we are all called to proclaim that the Kingdom of Heaven has come near. And with our fellow fishers of people, we are called to live that out and hook the jaws of injustice and rip them out of the water. And in the tradition of those Galilean disciples, may we have every ounce of courage that they had as the early Church.

I'll leave you with this quote that Bishop Donna had on her Facebook page. It's a quote from the Jewish Talmud. “Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.” We are stewards of God's grace. We are the keepers of the light. We only hold this torch of the gospel for a time. We only get one chance at it for our generation. Let's keep the flame burning until such time as it is for the next faithful ones to take it up. Amen.