

Invitation to the Dance

A SERMON BY THE REV. RICHARD W. NEAL

BASED ON MATTHEW 4:12-23

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Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (Matt. 4:17)

GOD IS NOT INTERESTED IN WHAT YOU DO. That was the opinion of Meister Eckhart, the great fourteenth-century German mystic. God is not interested in what we do, Eckhart believed, because nothing we do can affect God's love for us. God's love is never earned, and it is never lost. God's love is given freely and completely, out of God's own nature, and it abides forever.

That idea was not new with Meister Eckhart. It echoes the insight Saint Paul shared with the Corinthians. "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself," Paul wrote, "*not counting their trespasses against them*" (2 Cor. 5:19). God was taking the initiative, making the first and decisive move, to restore the relationship that binds us to the source of life, and in doing it God was not weighing our brokenness and sin in the balance.

It's important to understand that, I believe, if we are to rightly hear Jesus' call to repent. For some people, the call to repentance has a scowling, finger-wagging feel about it, like a stern parent telling us to straighten up *or else*. The "or else" usually has something to do with rejection and punishment, with losing God's love and being consigned forever to the outer darkness. To be sure, there's plenty enough of that imagery in our scriptures, if that's what you're looking for. And because of the enduring influence of Latin theology and Victorian inhibitions, our tradition often looks for it.

That's not, I'm convinced, what Jesus had in mind. He wasn't scolding or threatening people into joining his new movement. He was inviting them to jump into a new way of life, true and abundant life. He was calling them *out* of a life that was familiar but limited, in which they invested themselves in things that were fading and passing away. He was calling them *into* a full, new life that lay wide open before them, a life in which they would invest themselves in things that endured. He was inviting them to stop trudging through life and start dancing. Don't put it off, he said; do it now, or you'll miss out on an eternal opportunity.

A HOT-AIR BALLOON doesn't land in front of your car every day. It happened to Sheryl and me when we were living in Vermont several years ago, right in the middle of our village. We were driving toward home one Saturday, where I had a sermon to finish and some other work

to do for the next day, and though I felt the pressure of preparing for worship, we stopped as the balloon settled into an open lot, joining a small crowd of people who were gathering there.

With hardly any invitation, and with only a little coaching from the pilot, people started helping gather up the balloon's envelope, fold it, and pack it into the basket. Sheryl got involved, too, wading into the snow with most of the others. Slowly, and almost without notice, that spontaneous gathering of unrelated onlookers became a team joined in a common effort.

While all that was happening, I stood on the side with a few others, feeling my tension grow as I watched the minutes tick away, thinking about the sermon I had to finish and the other things I had to do in my study. As I watched the gathering and packing of that balloon, my mind and heart were elsewhere, and my spirit was pushing as hard as it could to leave. I had things to do, important things. My impatience must have been palpable.

After the loading of the balloon was complete, I gulped down the champagne that the pilot passed around and pushed to get back on the road. And I remember, as we drove away, the feeling that Sheryl's heart remained. It stayed with that rare experience of retrieving a hot-air balloon, with the little community that had formed spontaneously by the road in that small Vermont village. Today I still remember the balloon and the experience by the roadside, an experience that, while I was there physically, I entirely missed spiritually. I have no memory at all of what I said in that sermon. I remember only what I lost by not being available for the opportunity and invitation of that moment.

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN has come near, Jesus said. Life as God created it to be, the life you've dreamed about, that generations of dreamers have told about, has settled out of the sky right in front of you. It invites you to turn aside from where you've been going, to set aside the passing things that have preoccupied you, to stop trudging through life and to join others in the dance.

PRAYER — As the first ones heard in Galilee so long ago, dear God, so we hear your invitation to the dance. Today, as then, the music of the spheres pulses through creation. Help us turn aside from what has for too long preoccupied us and move to the rhythms of your eternal life.