

## LEAPS AND BOUNDS

Preached by Rev. Jacob Bolton  
Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, VA  
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Matthew 4:12–23

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*Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.” From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”*

*As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.*

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Just this past weekend, a beloved member of this congregation said to me, “Hey, it’s been a month since your installation and it’s great having you here. Congratulations!” Now to be honest, this caught me a bit off guard, and it took me hopefully not too awkward of a moment of silence before I responded. “Yes, you are right! Thank you very much!”

You see, in the midst of the Advent/Christmas/New Year/Epiphany/MLK weekend whirlwind, I celebrated my official one month-aversary here at Westminster — what we like to say “called and installed” here in the Presbyterian Church – yet in that moment last week, I can assure you it wasn’t at the forefront of my mind. But a member of the congregation who had witnessed it, who had been at the installation service, remembered. She had been among those who responded, “We do,” when the congregation was asked if they would pray and encourage our relationship to mature and develop as we walk this Westminster path together. I silently said a prayer of thanks for this woman, this Saint of Westminster, who was bearing witness to God’s love in my life. But I am certainly not alone, not the only person who has been blessed with the holy hug of “we do” lately.

Just this month we have baptized an infant, a child and an adult, and during those services we made this vow:

Do we, the members of Christ’s church, promise to guide and nurture the one to be baptized by word and deed, with love and prayer, encouraging them to know and to follow Christ and to be a faithful member of the church?

To which we all answered. We do.

Next Sunday is the congregational meeting, during which we will be ordaining and installing church officers. This is a sacred time when new elders and deacons are asked questions about their faith, their will to lead, their desire to serve in this office. But then we, everyone else in attendance, the congregation are also asked questions. We are asked:

A. Do we, the members of the church, accept these people as elders and deacons chosen by God through the voice of this congregation, to lead us in the way of Jesus Christ?

To which we all answer: We do.

B. Do we agree to encourage them, to respect their decisions, and to follow as they guide us, serving Jesus Christ, who alone is Head of the church?

Answer: We do.

In pondering the power of our shared communal vows, Lutheran Clergy woman Kimberly Knowle-Zeller comments that those two words “We do” may be the (very) heart of what it means to be in Christian community. Baptisms, weddings, confirmations, and ordinations all involve promises of “We do” or “We will.” It should never be a mere rote response. For our “We do” binds each one of us to the larger community and give us all an opportunity to be God’s hands and feet in this world.”

At a recent Children’s Formation Committee meeting, children’s baptisms were lifted up as one of everyone’s favorite moments in worship. With a congregation so blessed and immersed in children and family life, we collectively need to proclaim “We do” through our co-parenting actions. When one of us can’t wrangle our children in the pews, a friend who offers a hand demonstrates to us all that we’re not alone. When the children of this church are spoken to as equals, given the opportunity to participate and engage in a fashion that makes sense to them, when they are asked sincere questions about how they’re doing, then they know there are people, people of faith, who care for them. If at some point their faith wavers, and friends whose doesn’t, they’ll know people who are ready to listen. Perhaps, if they ever turn their back on the church, they’ll remember the faces, the welcome, the nudges of encouragement they once received. They’ll know there are people who made a promise to be with them in the life of faith. The promise of “We do” will be known in the people who’ve embraced them.

I don’t have the chance to do this at every wedding I officiate, but when given the opportunity, I love to ask of the congregation gathered:

Do all of you witnessing these vows promise to do everything in your power to uphold this couple in their marriage? If so, please say “We do.”

The hope is that this particular “We do” will go forth with the couple throughout their marriage, expressed in friends and family offering prayers and encouragement, reminding the couple that no matter what society says about their wedding day, about their relationship, they are not making this commitment alone.

At my ordination, the Moderator of the Presbytery asked me questions about preaching, teaching, and living faithfully. After answering each individual question in the affirmative I remember seeing the faces of many who had witnessed my life in Christ—people who were present at my baptism, at my confirmation, at my wedding. People who took seriously their words of “We do.” Tears of joy streamed down my face as I heard the congregation say those two words again.

Bryant Kirkland, former pastor of Faith Avenue Presbyterian Church, had a popular saying: always encouraging people to come to worship and to find a home in the church. Kirkland said, “You can’t go it alone in New York.” Friends, with all due respect to Kirkland, and by basing my statement on centuries of reformed theology, we can’t go it alone anywhere, we don’t go it alone anywhere, we all go it together.

When we say, “We do,” we don’t just bind ourselves together, we affirm one another’s identity in Christ. When we say, “We do” we are honoring, dignifying, embracing one another as unique, beloved, children of God. When we say, “We do” we commit ourselves to the Beloved community, called, and promising, to live, rejoice, learn, engage, grieve and create together.

In this month when we celebrate his birth, it is perhaps Dr. King that described this Beloved Community best. For it is in a community like this that while every person has basic individuality, has basic autonomy, what each one does impacts and effects the rest of the group. This concept, that King started to explore in his Doctoral dissertation research in Boston, was a theme throughout the rest of his life’s work. The Beloved Community is a

community in which all people, all people, will be honored and treated with respect simply because they are human beings created in God's image and loved by that same one true God. This is what we help create when we say, "We do." This is what we perpetuate when we live our own sacred vows.

When Andrew and Peter, James and John encounter Jesus, and are asked to follow him, they say "We do," by immediately leaving their nets, immediately leaving their boat, and following him. The word *immediately* has been translated from the Koine Greek term "Eutheos," which means "immediately or straightaway", and is often used elsewhere in the New Testament to designate that there is NO HESITATION. No time passes, there is no pause, this is an immediate, assertive response. This word is used when Jesus immediately restores people's sight, when Jesus immediately calms the sea, and also each time Peter denies Jesus and immediately the cock crows. Does the world always respond to Jesus call immediately? Sadly, Peter proves it doesn't. Do we proclaim "We do" with the same "Eutheos" as the first disciples?

Think about this for a moment, think about all the people you have said "We do" to throughout your life. All the baptisms, the confirmations, ordinations, installations, the weddings. Now stop for a moment – and think about all the people who has said "We do" to you.

I was recently discussing with a pastor from another denomination the reality of secular life in the world today. He was sharing with me his views that the larger culture no longer sees transcendence in the world, there is no more experiencing the mystical, there is no more acknowledging the holy in creation. No one anymore is tied to a church. He told me he thought no one sees the divine anymore in the other.

And all this time all I could think about were the children of this church. For the last month, all our kids during Creation Station have been learning about John the Baptist. They have learned that he had big hair and ate locusts. He baptized people in the Jordan River. He was Jesus' cousin. He wore camel fur. But where did he baptize people? Was it up near the Temple in Jerusalem? No, it was out in the wilderness. John was baptizing the people that were not as tied to the religious institutions of the day but were outside of that realm looking for something, looking for transcendence, looking for the divine. And the entire time he was telling people someone else was coming not to baptize with water like him, but to baptize with Fire and the Spirit. And that person, friends, is Jesus the Christ. And when he asks to drop our nets and follow, and what is our response. "We do."

For who in the world claims to live in community, not just with their spiritual siblings, but in community with all of Creation and with the God in in whose image we have all been created? "We do."

Who names the ways we have done this poorly, the ways we have fallen short, the times we have not responded in the spirit of "Eutheos," and vowed together to do better? "We do."

Who promises to live a life rich with compassion, courage, and mercy? "We do."

Who has members that come up to their pastor and question certain parts of the Apostles creed, and does this with the sure confidence that their faith community supports them wherever they are on their spiritual journey? "We do."

Who brings their five-year-old friend puzzles, because she just had her tonsils out and is tired of hanging out at home, alone all week? "We do."

Who acts with justice? "We do."

Who loves tenderly? "We do."

Who serves one another, and walks humbly with God? "We do."

Who hands Bibles to their third graders because our hope and prayer is that the Word of God is instilled in the hearts of our children? “We do.”

Who knows that Kirkland, King, and Kimberly Knowle-Zeller are right? We can't do this alone; we do this in Beloved Community, and we affirm this regularly together? “We do.”

Just like the fishermen who did not hesitate, we too know there is a better way, a more immediate way, a more meaningful way to live our lives and to care for the world. It is not an obligation. It is not a question. It is an opportunity. An opportunity that what special group of people get to live out prayerfully, everyday together?

“We do.”