

SERMON TITLE: "Journey Together with Purpose"
SERMON TEXT: Matthew 4:12-25
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: October 30, 2022, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

As some of you know, I've been very involved this week trying to provide some compassionate care for a couple who came to our church on Tuesday afternoon. Using my less-than-fluent Spanish, I learned that Yanier and Yusimi are refugees from Cuba. Because life in Cuba has become extremely difficult, thousands and thousands of Cubans have left their island nation and have done everything in their power to make their way to the United States. Like me, you've probably heard multiple news stories about Cubans who tried to go 90 miles by boat to Florida, only to capsize in a storm. Thousands of other Cubans, like Yanier and Yusimi, have taken a much, much longer route, by flying to the South American countries of Surinam or Guyana, and then making their way by bus and by foot to Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, and then Mexico.

Twenty-one days ago, Yanier and Yusimi then crossed the Rio Grande into Texas, and turned themselves in to Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, as you may have heard them called. After processing them, ICE then put Yanier and Yusimi on a plane to Salt Lake City. From the Salt Lake airport, Yanier and Yusimi were bussed to Ogden. On Friday, when I was helping Yanier and Yusimi, we encountered a family of three from Venezuela. Their story was very similar. They too had turned themselves in to Immigration and had been flown to SLC and bussed to Ogden.

Can you imagine how hard life must be in their home country to cause persons to work so hard to migrate so far and through such difficulties to another country, with different customs and language and climate? This week was the first time for all of them to see snow and to feel so cold. But these two families certainly aren't alone. News articles and helping agencies here in Utah tell of thousands and thousands of people who are traveling the same routes with similar struggles. Out of desperation and faith in God, they spend all the money they have and put forth this strenuous effort because they hold

out hope that life can be better in their future. The sad reality is that, once these immigrants arrive in the U.S., it's still nearly impossible for them to get legal permission to work. They bump up against roadblocks at every turn. If I've learned anything in this week dedicated to helping Yanier and Yusimi, it's that our American immigration system is in serious need of improvement. But the migrants keep coming because they are driven by the dream and motivated by the vision that there could be a place where they could work to provide for their families and where they could live in safety. All over the world there are migrants who journey together with such a determination and purpose.

1—BIBLE STORIES OF JOURNEY TOGETHER WITH PURPOSE

Because we Americans have such a good life, it's hard for us to understand and imagine that kind of journey together with purpose. But actually, that's what we've been talking about for the past few weeks. In Bible story after Bible story, we've read about people to whom God gave a dream, a vision, and a purpose to journey together to a place of promise. Abram, Sarai, and their servants; Moses and the Hebrews liberated from Egyptian slavery; and the people returning to Jerusalem after Babylonian captivity—they all had a dream and a vision. On a journey together with their people, with God's guidance, and with rejoicing, they all moved forward with purpose.

Today's story from the Gospel of Matthew continues this theme. In the earlier verses of Matthew 4, Jesus had gone through his 40 days of wilderness temptations. But now, upon hearing of the arrest of John the Baptist, Jesus knew it was time to get going. The socioeconomic, political, and spiritual situation was dire. We are told in other scriptures that, soon after his arrest, John the Baptist was executed. Jesus' people weren't safe. So Jesus journeyed to Galilee, where he began calling disciples to join with him in his cause. Jesus had a purpose, and he needed others to journey together with him.

It's important for us to see in these verses what Jesus' purpose was. In verses 12-17, Matthew tells us that Jesus' actions and words brought light to people who lived in darkness. Jesus proclaimed,

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This message was a relief for all who had burdens of guilt and who wanted to find a way to put sin behind and live in righteousness. Jesus offered a clear way for persons to step out of that darkness and into the light.

The sins they committed could have been wrong thoughts and prejudices. They could have been actions that caused harm to themselves and to other people. Those sins could have been like those listed in the Ten Commandments—don’t steal, murder, lie, cheat on your spouse, or be jealous of your neighbors. I suspect other sins might have been on Jesus’ mind also, like apathy and lack of compassion. Later in the gospels, over and over again, we hear Jesus criticizing the religious leaders because of their harshness and lack of sympathy for the needs of the people. Jesus wanted people to improve their personal morality by avoiding wrong and by doing what was right. For sure, Jesus’ purpose included this kind of spiritual transformation.

When Jesus called the fishermen and others to become his disciples, he wanted *them* to claim this purpose with him. Many gospel stories indicate that the disciples each had some work to do on their own doubts, prejudices, and greed for power. They needed to become committed, like Jesus, to helping those who were suffering from poverty, sickness, and discrimination. As the disciples experienced Jesus’ forgiveness for their own sins, they then became more able to share that forgiving love and transformative mercy with others.

The same would be true for us who are Jesus’ disciples today. Jesus calls each one of us to repent of our sins, and he then empowers us to live in his holiness. Jesus calls us individually and together as a congregation to proclaim this gospel of spiritual transformation and make it real in our own lives and in the lives of people around us. This is the calling of Jesus. As we journey together as a congregation, this is our purpose—just like it’s spelled out in our vision statement that we recite at the beginning of every committee meeting. If you know our vision statement, say it along with me:

First United Methodist Church will meet spiritual needs
by developing relationships with Christ, community, and the world.

As we journey together with Jesus, our purpose is to meet spiritual needs.

2—PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL WELL-BEING

We might be tempted to think that this purpose of meeting spiritual needs happens mostly by teaching the Bible and doctrines of Christian faith—usually to fairly well-behaved people who don't have too many problems. But Jesus didn't just seek out those who had their act together. Instead, Jesus called disciples to join him on a journey of getting up close and personal with folks who had a lot of difficulties in their lives. In Matthew 4:23-25, we read about people afflicted with every disease, sickness, and pain. We are told about demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics. These weren't the easy problems of life. Jesus and his disciples jumped in at the deep end of the swimming pool. And we know from other scriptures that Jesus also fed multitudes of people who were hungry, and he even sometimes went so far as to minister to women and children. With compassion like that, with a willingness to reach out and connect to the lowliest of the low, and with his miraculous abilities, it's no wonder Jesus' fame spread and that people followed him all around the region.

We have a tendency to think that Jesus *alone* could do all these things. But the reason Jesus called disciples was so that they would learn from him and repeat what he was doing. So, in the 2000 years since, disciples of Jesus have constantly been about the business of caring for the hungry and the poor, providing shelter, food, clothing, and medical care. Until recently, most of the hospitals in most countries were built by Christian churches. Right here in Ogden, we have two major hospitals. One was built by the Catholics, and the other by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Both were inspired by Jesus' purpose to care for the body as well as the soul.

Today, with large corporations taking over the medical field, Christians have less to do with providing medical care. And we have turned over a lot of other human needs to governmental and non-profit social service agencies. The church has become less and less responsible for these matters, so that—in most circumstances—our engagement with caring for human needs is limited to fundraising

and making financial donations. For example, proceeds from our recent Craft Fair will go to help victims of domestic violence, persons who are homeless or hungry, and folks who need counseling. That's great, and I'm very glad we're able to support those agencies who have expertise in helping people. I'm also very grateful that some of you who heard about the immigrants at our church door have generously offered donations to the Pastor's Discretionary Fund to help shelter Yanier and Yusimi.

This direct aid to persons some of us have actually met is important. Otherwise, we then tend to lose connection with actual people who are in need. There becomes a distance and a separation between we who have and those who have not. This is true whether we're talking about the distance between the suburbs and the inner city of our own community or the distance between our rich United States of America and the poor nations of the world. It isn't that we have bad intentions or that we want to disregard the poor and the sick, the hungry and the homeless. It's just that we very naturally gravitate toward other people like ourselves who have roofs over our heads, food in our refrigerators, and gasoline in our cars. As a worker at the Latter Day Saints Transient Services explained, many people in all our churches don't see and don't understand how great the needs are, and so even we Christians sometimes fail to support the public policies that would best line up with Jesus' purpose. The farther we stay away from those in need, the less our ability to develop relationships with the community and the world, and our connection to Jesus' purpose diminishes. It's like Jesus said to some of his critics: It isn't the healthy who need a doctor; it's the sick. That's why Jesus made it his purpose to spend time with them and care for them.

CONCLUSION

As we at First United Methodist Church make plans to fund our ministry for 2023, I hope we will share Jesus' purpose. Let's keep our ministry strong so that we truly can meet spiritual needs by developing relationships with Christ, the people in our community, and the world. Let's join in with Jesus and the disciples. Let's journey together with purpose.