



**“A Total Turnaround”**

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***The Third Sunday after Epiphany  
January 23, 2001  
Mt. 4:12-23 (NRSV)***

The sign on the hardware store window read: “Gone fishing.” The owner did not indicate where, when, or for how long he would be gone. Apparently the answers to those questions were simply for him to know and for us to find out.

My father was perturbed by this notice. He had gone to town to buy nails, so that he could finish shingling the porch roof before the forecasted rain came the next day.

Fishing notices like this were rare and memorable in my experience as a child. Proprietors didn’t close their businesses during the week. They simply couldn’t afford to, so we were left to wonder why the hardware store owner was AWOL.

My father learned a few days later at the Men’s Sunday School class that the owner had been lured out of town by a brother-in-law’s invitation to go deep sea fishing in the Caribbean.

“Sweet,” I thought to myself, when I overheard my dad relaying this story to my mother. “Who wouldn’t jump at an invitation like that?”

II

Fast forward forty years to today. Imagine posting a similar sign on the door of your workplace or home in response to today’s gospel lesson. Imagine posting a “gone fishing” sign on your door.

What would it take to lure you away from your routine? What would it take for you to answer Jesus’ call like James and John did? Perhaps you’d jump at the chance if the invitation included airline tickets to the Caribbean and deep sea fishing; but what if it didn’t, or what if you were slower to warm to the idea?

The popular interpretation of “call passages” like the one found in Matthew’s gospel reading today is that the truly faithful hear God’s voice and make an abrupt change in their lives that fits with God’s plan, and then they live happily ever after.

The truth is, however, that a deeper reading of the gospel reveals that the word “repentance” actually implies a more gradual process, and more varied experiences, than is assumed in popular theology. One’s “call” is highly subjective and dependent, as theologian Henry Nouwen has explained, because it is related to the intersection of the world’s deep need and our deep longing.<sup>1</sup> There is no one-size-fits-all job description for a disciple, not even a one-size-fits-all job description for disciples who specialize in evangelism. It is through our different callings and gifts, then, that we collectively contribute to the rich tapestry of God’s mission in the world.

In order to gain clarity about how our particular calls contribute to God’s mission, it’s helpful to probe the meaning of the term “repentance.” It’s also helpful to do this work, because so many of us have an aversion to the term repentance, and because it is so frequently misunderstood. A little etymological study reveals that the term “repentance” is based on the Greek term “metanoia,” which has to do with the concept of “turning,” or “returning,” as opposed to “shame on you!”

Think for a moment about your own life in relationship to this concept of metanoia. Do you remember a time when you turned a significant corner, or returned to something essential to your being? Consider what was going on then. What was that experience of metanoia like for you—that experience of turning or returning?

- Did your vocation finally come into focus, or change?
- Did you say a firm “yes” or “no” to a relationship?
- Did you hear the voice of a mentor guiding you along the way?
- Did you bite into something new and become surprised by the taste?
- Did you finally see a way through the “briar patch” of life?
- Did you sense a homecoming?

Again, think about your own life in relationship to metanoia. Do you recall a significant shift—a turning or returning?

### III

To stimulate your reflection about what turning and returning might look like in your life, I’ll offer a few illustrations that have been meaningful to me and others in our congregation. The first has to do with the recovery process associated with an addiction.

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<sup>1</sup> See Henry Nouwen’s definition of “vocation,” in *Whistling in the Dark: A Theological ABC*.

Dan Wakefield, a contemporary novelist, journalist, and screen writer, described his modern-day experience of metanoia in a book he published in 1997 called *Returning: A Spiritual Journey*.<sup>2</sup> Here Wakefield describes his midlife return to the church which began with a decision to attend the midnight Christmas Eve service at All Saints Church in Boston. His impulse to return to church was the first in a series of many baby steps, or turnings, that led Wakefield to lead a healthier life without drugs and alcohol.

Turning from a life of addiction, as Wakefield did, is often a slower process than most addicts and their loved ones would like it to be, and (as it turns out) this slower process is more reflective of the metanoia implied in the gospels. Recovery work, in practice, rarely looks like the abrupt about-face that popular theology associates with the term repentance.

While our lives might cry out for an about-face, the fact of the matter is that lasting change—especially the behavioral change needed for addicts and co-dependents—often takes longer to develop and is only legitimately realized and celebrated over a meaningful length of time.

#### IV

Another example of metanoia—of turning and returning—is a very personal example involving my own coming out process.

For as long as I've known that I was lesbian, I have heard a cacophony of voices telling me to "repent." That's "repent," as in, "Shame on you! You should change." My experience is not unique for LGBT persons. Most of the gay people I know could tell you a similar story.

Imagine, then, how liberating a richer understanding of the term metanoia is for LGBT persons when we discover that the term is actually about turning and returning to our true selves—to being who God created us to be—rather than shame on you.

Getting from shame-on-me to living unapologetically out of the closet was a slow turning and returning process for me. It evolved as I came to discern that I was definitely lesbian and clearly called to be a pastor, and that I could not be who I was or fulfill my calling if I denied one or the other of my identities. Ultimately, this important discernment process enabled me to lead an increasingly more integrated and authentic life, and to answer God's call more fully—even though there were many risks and hardships associated with this clarity that I achieved and this path that I walked.

I came out to myself as a youth. If I had known the vocabulary words to describe who I was then and how I felt, and if I had grown up in a more supportive environment, I probably would have come out by age 10. I didn't, so I lived a pretty closeted life for another 22 years. Coming way out was a gradual process that resulted from a combination of both very positive and very negative circumstances for me.

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<sup>2</sup> Dan Wakefield, *Returning: A Spiritual Journey*. Beacon: Boston, 1997.

The positives had to do with falling in love and making a lifelong commitment to Stephanie, and with finally getting a job where I had some degree of hope that I would not be fired for being gay.

The negatives included things like being subjected to homophobic death threats and slanderous allegations by persons who wanted me defrocked because I was lesbian, and because a group of people in my church proposed that our congregation should identify as “Open and Affirming (ONA).”

My detractors assumed I was gay, and assumed that I was “forcing the congregation” to make this decision, when in reality I had tried to put off the ONA process because I was terrified that it would become a dragnet for the homophobic behavior and modern-day witch trial that was brought against me in New York.

In the end, Stephanie and I learned from these negative experiences that the African-American lesbian poet, Audre Lorde, was right when she wrote, “Your silence will not protect you.”<sup>3</sup>

So, coming out was a kind of turning and returning process for me, as it has been for many LGBT persons. It was a process that required much discernment and risk-taking, but ultimately it was a process that enabled me to live a more integrated life, to more fully embrace my particular call to ministry, and to make a difference for at least some of the young people in the congregations that I’ve served.

## V

So now we see that turning or returning may be a more gradual process than commonly understood, and that it can look like a recovery process or a coming-out process. Metanoia can also look like a social movement. For example, *metanoia* could look like joining the slow food movement. This movement is based on our individual and collective desire to turn away from the world’s growing dependency on factory farms and international agribusiness.

According to the website hosted by Slow Food USA, a national organization that promotes this movement, “Slow Food is an idea, a way of living and a way of eating. It is a global, grassroots movement with thousands of members around the world that links the pleasure of food with a commitment to community and the environment.”<sup>4</sup>

To me, the slow food movement isn’t rocket science. It looks like the way that my grandparents raised, prepared, preserved, and ate food, and it looks like the way that many in our congregation and most of the world still lives.

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<sup>3</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984) p. 40.

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.slowfoodusa.org/index.php/slow\\_food/](http://www.slowfoodusa.org/index.php/slow_food/)

Slow Food USA presently has over 200 chapters involved in strengthening the connection between the food on our plates and the health of our planet. Their members engage in activities such as these:

- Raising public awareness, improving access, and encouraging the enjoyment of foods that are local, seasonal and sustainably grown
- Caring for the land and protecting biodiversity for today's communities and future generations
- Performing educational outreach within their communities and working with children in schools and through public programs
- Identifying, promoting and protecting fruits, vegetables, grains, animal breeds, wild foods, and cooking traditions at risk of disappearance
- Advocating for farmers and artisans who grow, produce, market, prepare, and serve wholesome food
- Promoting the celebration of food as a cornerstone of pleasure, culture, and community<sup>5</sup>

One doesn't have to be a member of Slow Food USA in order to join the slow food movement. There are several emerging programs in our neighborhood that promote and practice the slow food philosophy. Some examples include the following:

- The inclusion of gardening programs at our neighborhood schools, like Cherryland Elementary;
- The community gardening program called Gardeners of Eden, which is sponsored by the Cherryland Community Association; and
- Dig Deep Farms, an urban gardening and jobs program sponsored by the Alameda County Sheriff's Department.

Each one of these programs is an example of how some Eden members and neighbors already participate in the slow food movement, how they and we are turning around the way that food is produced and consumed in our community, and how they and we are responding to Jesus' invitation to turn and return to who God has called us to be and do, and to collectively create the world that God envisions.

## VI

Consider, if you will, pulling out a piece of paper and marker this week, and making a sign for your desk or your door that simply says: "Gone fishing." Consider rejecting

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www.slowfoodusa.org/index.php/slow\\_food/from\\_plate\\_to\\_planet/](http://www.slowfoodusa.org/index.php/slow_food/from_plate_to_planet/)

popular ideas about repentance as “shame on you,” and, instead, hold on to the possibilities of turning and returning to who you truly are and what you are called to do. If you do take these steps, don’t be surprised what a difference you’ll feel and what a difference you’ll make. Amen.