

Toward the north end of the lake sits a small town.

Further south, down its western shoreline, sits a major city.

The two don't have much in common and probably don't think very highly of one another.

The little town up north, surrounded by agrarian countryside, is sparsely populated by mostly simple folk, fishermen and farmhands and the kind of women who get excited about shopping trips to Wal-mart, people probably less likely to have a good education than a hat made out of cheese.

The big city to the south, meanwhile, is a bustling hub of urban vitality, a center of style and sophistication, a locus of political power and prestige, the intellectual and cultural capital of the entire region, the city with which the lake is most immediately identified.

Diversely populated and always bustling with international traffic, the big city has plenty of reason for pride and a lot more happening than that cow town up north which no doubt resents it in its long, dark, quiet nights of boredom and ignorant envy.

Yet today, these two very different worlds become connected by more than just the lakeshore they share.

They come together in one storied clash of passion and power, a highly anticipated, high stakes showdown for supremacy.

Today, at last, the matchup you've been waiting for all week: Tiberias against Capernaum.

*Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Wisconsin.*

*He left Rockford and made his home in Green Bay.*

*From that time Jesus began to proclaim, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.*

Word for word, that is, Jesus proclaimed the exact same message that got John thrown into jail in Chicago.

The kingdom of heaven was a threat, of course, to the kingdom of Herod, the urban dictator who would ultimately set John's head on a cheese platter.

For now, Herod has John arrested and imprisoned in his palace dungeon in Tiberias, and word of it gets out around, including to Jesus in Nazareth, who decides it is now time to leave family and familiarity and the safety of anonymity and to launch his ministry from a new home in Capernaum.

So Jesus moves to Green Bay.

It is disillusioning enough, of course, that Jesus is an illegitimate bastard, and a redneck Jew, and a convicted criminal, a demagogue and a death row inmate, a rabbi who breaks the law, a misunderstood messiah who dies on a cross, a haunting challenge to our assumptions rather than a sweet, blue eyed healer with a beatific mullet ready to fish you out of trouble or work miracles on demand, a mysterious figure who brings the kingdom of God not in timely and obvious acts of power but in unsatisfying fragments like broken bread and bulk rate wine shared by dysfunctional communities who seem to have as much influence over the way of the world as a small town preacher over a big-city king.

That's all frustrating, but Jesus choosing Green Bay is just too painful.

Why of all places does he have to go *there*?

Why does Jesus always seem to go exactly where we don't want to, and then why must he look through our horrified eyes into the depths of our very hearts--another place we don't want to go--and say, *Follow me?*

Follow you?

To Green Bay?

To all the desperate people in Galilee?

To a rabbinical academy for fishermen?

To the margins of society and the people and places that don't matter to anyone except God?

To a ministry and a message that will eventually get John killed, and you as well, on a cross where, instead of raining down righteous judgment like brimstone, you lose your life loving your enemies and praying for those who persecute you?

Really...follow *you?*

Today, we big city Christians gather for our annual congregational meeting to hear reports and to vote on budgets and leaders, basically to do the nuts-and-bolts business of "Where have we been?" and "Where are we going?"

There is more accent on the latter, this year, as we give less agenda time to oral staff and committee reports and more agenda time to conversation about our vision process and plans, but let's be honest.

We all know the answer to the question "Where are we going?"

For some of us, we're going to the parish hall for potluck as soon as the meeting is over.

For more of us, we're going to watch the game.

For all of us, the answer has almost everything to do with what we are looking forward to for ourselves and almost nothing to do with wherever Jesus is going, because that is either too mysterious and unclear for our impatient attention spans to bother with or so painfully clear that we want no part of it.

We'd rather write the agenda and plan the trip ourselves.

We'd rather script the congregation's future with careful planning than chance the bad ideas Jesus will have for us, because Jesus goes up to fisherman and off to Capernaum and directly into the fangs of trouble with a message about the kingdom of heaven that sounds to the ears of power like *Go Packers*...blessed are the poor and the peacemaking and the meek and the persecuted, love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you, follow me to the neglected margins of disease and prison and shame and despair where only light would dare to dawn.

We are much more interested, and understandably so, in where we are going than where Jesus is going.

Hey, at least we are going to church, we say -- and that is the problem.

Jesus doesn't want us to go to church.

Jesus wants us to be the church.

Go to the store, go to the salon, go to dinner and rehab and the theater and therapy.

Go to Capernaum and Green Bay and the borders of your comfort zone and the neighbor in need.

But if I ever encourage you to "go to church," please punch me in the mouth and pray I bleed to death before I can say it again.

We don't go to church, we go as church, in the backseat of a bus that Jesus drives most often to places we don't think we want to go.

We go to the flood zone of New Orleans to scab our knees and expand our souls laying  
floorboard for a woman history will never remember.

We go to the streets of Chicago this Thursday night after the powers have locked up their palaces  
to nourish those who have nowhere but the icy streets to live.

We go to strangers with invitation and to the unqualified with a summons to serve in a kingdom  
that on paper cannot match the power of Herod yet still makes him nervous.

We go to our enemies and persecutors, whiners and losers, political rivals and Packer fans, the  
people who irritate and exasperate us, to extend a hand of blessing and peace.

And if we can't see God, if we can't find or experience or identify God's presence and guidance  
in our lives, it is probably because we are spending too much time with Herod in Tiberias  
and too little time with Christ in Capernaum.

Perhaps we are spending too much time in this sanctuary and too little time on the streets, too  
much time in committee and too little time in the countryside.

Perhaps we are spending too much time on our feet in argument and too little time on our knees  
around the altar, too much time with big ideas and too little time with broken bread.

The kingdom of heaven is coming near, but it takes repentance to recognize it.  
Jesus is going to Capernaum, and to call together a community of misfits, and to cure the  
marginalized, and to call into question our sophisticated status quo, and to the needy  
crowds, and to the bloody cross, and to the center of our deepest darkness to shine a great  
and terrifying and healing light.

Where are we going?