

Following and Fishing
January 21 and 22, 2023
Third Sunday After Epiphany
Isaiah 9:1-4, I Corinthians 1:10-18, Matthew 4:12-25

Isaiah 9:2-3 - The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil.

Matthew 4 - While walking 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 fishers of men."

Dear Friends,

That's quite a prayer that we just sang. That Jesus who is the light of the world would shine on us in such a way that our hearts would be set on fire for the Kingdom. That as we come into His awesome presence, His Spirit would search us and try us and consume every bit of our darkness. That as we gather in this very sanctuary and gaze into His brightness, our faces would display the very likeness of Jesus. That as we spend quality time with the one true God and with one another, that our lives would be like mirrors reflecting the glory of God.

Last weekend, our sermon theme was Seeing and Pointing, as we listened into John the Baptist declaring Jesus to be the very Lamb of God who doesn't just excuse or explain or rationalize our sins, he takes them away. And the weekend before that, our theme was "Rising and Shining" as we focused on letting our Gospel lights shine in such a way that others are attracted to Christ and His promises.

Today - Following and Fishing.

Two memories I offer, by way of introduction - both from my growing up years of helping my dad on the farm. The first had to do with five or 6 dairy cows, which I would be sent to call them from the pasture into the barn for the evening milking. The preferred strategy was to cry out over and over again "Co bossie, co bossie" and hope that they would follow you in for the feed that awaited them. (On a side note, I looked up the origins of that saying and discovered that "bos" is Latin for "cow" and "co" is Latin for come.)

Now if that didn't work, I would grab my favorite stick, do a little whacking on the rear end, and drive them in!

My second memory was when I would help my dad feed the weaned calves with buckets of oats. The best strategy was to get to the troughs and dump in the oats before they would surround me and push me around - that's how hungry they were. No trouble getting them to follow me to the feed bunk, to be sure.

Our text for today is about how Jesus calls people to follow him, and how he promised four particular men - Simon, Andrew, James, and John - that if they would follow him, he would make them fishers of men. Or to use the language of Faith Lutheran's Mission Statement, He would teach them what it meant to have a heart from God and a heart for others. Which corresponds to the language of the two great commandments - that we would spend our days loving the Lord our God with all of our heart and soul and mind, and secondly, by loving our neighbors as much as we love ourselves.

Two lessons we would learn today about following Jesus so closely that His Spirit is able to set our hearts on fire for His Kingdom. ***Lesson #1 is that a heart from God starts by spending quality time with Him. And Lesson #2 is that a heart for others starts by spending quality time with them.***

Lesson #1 is that a heart from God starts by spending quality time with Him.

In Jesus' day, the normal process was for disciples to seek out the rabbis that they wanted to follow. They would seek out the teachers of religion that seemed to be the brightest and best and follow them. But in our text for today, Jesus does just the opposite. He chooses who his first seminary students will be, he pursues them, he calls them to follow him. He invites them to spend quality time with him and to learn all the ups and downs of the kingdom. For three years, they were with him 24/7.

Year #1 was a year of inauguration, Year #2 a year of popularity, and year #3 a year of opposition. The first year was in the villages of Judea and teaching in Jerusalem, the second year in Galilee among both Jews and Gentiles, and the third was on his way to suffering and death at Calvary.

Today's Gospel lesson is in that second year, as Jesus hears of John the Baptist being arrested, and he withdraws into Galilee. He moves away from his hometown

of Nazareth, where they rejected him - and into Capernaum, where the crowds were attracted to him. Capernaum was an active fishing and trading center. And so we're not at all surprised when the first four disciples were engaged in the industry of fishing.

For the next three years, Jesus would teach them everything they needed to know. They would listen in as he taught in the synagogues, as he preached on the seashores, and as he told stories by the campfire. They would watch with amazement as he gave the blind their sight, the deaf their hearing, the paralyzed their ability to walk, and the demon possessed their freedom. They would laugh at his jokes, scratch their heads at his obscurities, and say to each other - "did you see that?" as he walked on water one day, snoozed through a storm the next day, and fed thousands of people with a few loaves of bread and a couple fish the next day.

When Jesus promised to make these disciples fishers of men, he was calling them to be his apostles. He would train them as only could train them and then commission them to turn the world upside down with His Gospel.

When we think about what it means for Christians and local churches to be on this fishing expedition, we do well to think not so much in terms of baiting, hooking, and reeling people into the ark of the Christian Church. Rather, we would think of the fishing in terms of casting nets and gently inviting people to come on into the boat and join us on a journey through all the ups and downs of life.

Or to use some distinctively Lutheran language, the fishing nets would correspond with the means of grace - the Word of God and the Sacraments. As often as we spend quality time hearing, thinking about, and reflecting on Holy Scriptures, that often the Spirit of God is able to teach, guide, counsel, mentor, rebuke, and encourage us. As often as we eat and drink at His Holy Supper, that often Jesus holds us close, He whispers into our ears that He loves us unconditionally, He looks us in the eyes and declares that no matter what nasty habits we have fallen into, no matter how far we have strayed, no matter what secret sins we are regretting, He loves us.

I saw a meme on Facebook this week that had a picture of sweet Jesus looking down and commenting, "I saw you check your smart phone notifications during the sermon hymn this morning."

Greg Finke, in his book, "Joining Jesus on His Mission," lists five practices of what he calls a missional Christian, 1) seeking the kingdom, 2) hearing from Jesus, 3) talking with people, 4) doing good, and 5) praying with people.

When I think of “hearing from Jesus,” every day, I think of my mom. She had as strong a devotional life as a person could have - of course I might be a bit biased. She spent an hour or more every day in prayer, quiet time, and reading of Scripture. In the last 25 years of their marriage, Dad was included in that time. I don’t think he had a choice. Sundays were all about church and Bible Class with almost no exceptions. On one of her final days, as she approached her death in a memory care unit in Fargo, it was devotional time on steroids. My sisters would read and pray with her. The hospice chaplain would read Scripture and pray with her. Her home town Pastor (Daenzer) was there one afternoon, and along with her son the pastor, we spent two hours tag teaming, reading Scripture, preaching, and praying, singing, chanting. Eventually I noticed Mom dozing off, just wanting to rest her eyes, but not wanting to fall asleep when her pastor was there. I said, “Mom, should we keep on praying with you, or is that enough for now?” With her soft and frail voice, she whispered, “that’s enough.”

Hymn #54 in The Lutheran Hymnal, verse 1 comes to mind, *Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah, Pilgrim through this barren land. I am weak, but Thou art mighty; Hold me with Thy powerful hand, Bread of heaven, Feed me till I want no more.*”

And Lesson #2 is that a heart for others starts by spending quality time with them.

Some of you may be familiar with a book and inventory with the title “The Five Languages of Love.” The premise is that we all have one or two of the languages that when spoken, help us to feel loved. The five languages include 1) words of affirmation, 2) physical touch, 3) receiving of gifts, 4) acts of service, and 5) quality time.

The author writes, “*People who speak the love language of quality time want to be the object of their lover's undivided attention. They want to feel cherished and prioritized, and rather than receiving gifts, words, acts, or touch, they prefer to simply spend meaningful time together.*”

Jesus declares in John 13, “**By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.**” In other words, if you see a Jesus follower loving others you are seeing and recognizing evidence that the kingdom is present and active through that person.

Finke spends an entire chapter on the third of the missional practices, which is talking with people. He writes, *“Jesus can do more with two people who are talking with each other than he can with two people who are successfully ignoring each other.”*

He makes a strong case for noticing people that God has placed in our proximity instead of minding our own business. For being intentional about starting conversations instead of staying in our own comfort zones. Of course, even more important than talking with people is listening to their stories. Will Rogers once expressed it this way, *“I never learned anything while I was talking.”*

Some of you may be thinking to yourselves that since you are introverted, you would rather let others do the talking. Finke suggests that both extroverts and introverts bring strengths and weaknesses to this practice. Extroverts may not be all that good at listening and asking good questions, but they excel at initiating conversations and breaking the ice. Introverts might not be so good at initiating the conversation, but often excel at asking good questions, listening, and showing compassion.

Jesus, of course, was the perfect conversationalist, the perfect listener, and the asker of perfect questions. He excelled at showing compassion, and His one desire was to do the will of His Father. His Father’s will is that all should be saved and that none would perish. He invites us to follow Him closely in the days ahead, and as we do so, He promises to be present wherever we go, to multiply our collective joy, and to guide us along the way.

No doubt we will have our bad days, our ok days, and our good days. On our bad days, we will keep really good news to ourselves. On our ok days we will run to our God for refuge and strength. On our good days, we will be spending quality time with God and with people He has placed in our proximity. On every day, we are children of God, dearly loved, forgiven of our sins, and precious in His sight.

I close today with words that Hosanna Lutheran Church in Mankato, MN closes with at each of their services these days - on the subject of following and fishing.

- When we follow Jesus at home, our families get stronger.
- When we follow Jesus together, we get the support we need.
- When we follow Jesus into our neighborhood, our neighbors get the care they need.