



Sunday January 22, 2023
Matthew 4:12-23 (Third Sunday after Epiphany)

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Tony Acompanado

Let's take a quick poll. Show of hands for anyone who likes fishing or at any point in your life has ever gone fishing. Fishing is a big deal. So much so, that last year the sport fishing equipment market was over \$13 billion and is projected to be upwards of \$16 billion by 2027.

When I was young my dad used to take me fishing and if I close my eyes I can still recall the crisp early morning air along with all the sights, sounds, and smells as we got closer to the water. What I can't say for certain if it was something my dad loved to do and wanted to share it and teach it to his son, or if it was a way to give my mom a break from my younger know-it-all-self. Maybe it was a bit of both. Whatever it was, we were certainly contributors to the industry's growing market size. And truth be told what I enjoyed most about our fishing excursions at dawn wasn't the actual fishing part but getting to spend one-on-one time with my dad – along with the donuts, hot chocolate, and coffee he'd always buy us.

In our Gospel reading this week, Jesus approaches two sets of fishermen by the Sea of Galilee, and says to them, "*Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.*" Matthew's Gospel tells us the men immediately left their boats and followed Jesus.

Earlier I mentioned my *know-it-all younger self*. Truth is, I've always been curious about different things and how they work and why things are the way they are and because of that I've always taken an interest in learning about lots of different things. Now I certainly don't know everything about everything, but I do tend to know a little about a lot. And if you're foolish enough to bring this up to my wife she'll be sure to tell you just how annoying it is – even when it's proves useful. So when it comes to fishing, here's what I know. Despite doing it countless times throughout my life – I'm not really good at it. I'm just not. I enjoy going, but for me it's more about the peace and quiet, the beautiful scenery, sometimes the solitude, and more often the connection with whoever I might be with.

Sometimes I wonder if the reason I'm not good at it is because it just seems like there's so much one has to choose correctly in order to be successful. Boat, kayak, pier, waders, or ice. Bait, fly, spinning, bow, spear, or trolling. Ocean, lake, stream, river, or pond. What rod and reel combo to use and which pound test line is best. Then there's the endless options of hooks, baits, bobbers, weights, lures, jigs, nets, buckets, tackle boxes, fish finders, and motors to choose from. Then you also have to know what time of day or night and the ideal weather conditions on top of where the best spots are in a given body of water. I share all of this with you to say – I don't connect easily to Jesus's invitation to "*fish for people.*" Something about the metaphor makes me feel inadequate, incapable, unprepared, and unqualified. Gospel stories are challenging to grasp even at the best of times, but years of baggage like mine can make the task even harder.

But today's Gospel presents us with two unbelievably simple words of invitation in which we find the very essence of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus – *Follow Me*. And while being this straightforward may seem to make understanding this invitation oversimplified, I believe that Jesus is purposeful in what he says to these first disciples. See, at times I think we unnecessarily complicate things that God intends to be simple and straightforward. And lately, this has caused me to wonder whether part of the problem we have in churches is that sometimes we use words or phrases, and even entire sermons that don't seem to connect or make sense to us or apply to our everyday lives. *Discipleship* – the subject of today's gospel, is a perfect example.

Discipleship is this fancy word that we use in church to describe following the invitation of Jesus, growing in our relationship with him, and learning to live the way God wants us to live. The word discipleship is ambiguous in English, and coincidentally it doesn't even appear in the Bible. But once the word discipleship starts getting tossed around, so too do other terms – like *calling*. And calling is just more lingo for an invitation into something. Discipleship then is the process of answering Jesus' invitation, or "*call*", to follow him and develop a deeper, more intimate relationship with God. Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that the call to "follow me" was a call "to absolute discipleship," and that only in surrendering ourselves to Jesus' command could we, paradoxically, know our greatest joy. The more I learn about discipleship the more I wonder if the call to discipleship is less about *what we do*, and more about *who we are*. Think about this for a moment. God's call isn't simply to *do* something, but rather to *be* something – to be a child of God, to be a follower of Jesus, to be light in the darkness. So maybe being comes before doing, and maybe being even makes doing possible.

I wonder if that's what roused such an immediate response from Peter, Andrew, James and John is that they felt called to *be* something more than they had ever imagined. My guess is they didn't have a clue what they were in for, just the same as many of us today have absolutely no idea what it means to "fish for people." What I think they did recognize



Sunday January 22, 2023
Matthew 4:12-23 (Third Sunday after Epiphany)

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Tony Acompanado

was that Jesus saw something in them, something of value and worth. And although they had no idea where they would go, or what they would do, they knew that Jesus was calling *them* to be *His* disciples.

So, perhaps what you and I need this morning is a reminder in order to understand the call that Jesus places before us when he says, “follow me.” A reminder that you are first called to be children of God – that you are fearfully and wonderfully made in the very image of God. And even if you don’t fully understand what that means, I want you to hear loud and clear that it means God knows you, God values you and God loves you – and not for who you’re becoming, but precisely for who you are right here and right now. And this call that we hear Jesus issuing to the disciples, is the same invitation that he offers to us. So, if we’re going to follow him, then we need to learn to do it in the unique particulars of the lives, communities, cultures, families, and vocations we already find ourselves in. And we’ll have to trust that God values our intelligence, our backgrounds, our educations, our skills, and that he will multiply, shape, and bring to fruition everything we offer up to him in faith from the daily stuff of our lives.

“*I will make you,*” he tells the fishermen. I will cultivate, deepen, enliven, magnify, purify, protect, and perfect the people God created you to be.

Now I’m not suggesting that discipleship won’t require sacrifice, or change, or risk. It will. But I’m convinced these days that God is gentler with us than we are with ourselves. The spiritual transformations that have had the most traction and power in my life have been the ones that also feel the most organic, the most ordinary, the most close-to-home. Surrender to Jesus isn’t only about abandoning what we think we need. It’s about resurrection. It’s about abundant and authentic life. When Jesus promises to “make us,” it’s a commitment to nurture us, not a threat to sever us from all that we love. It’s a promise rooted in gentleness and respect, not violence and coercion. It’s a promise that when we dare to let go, the things we relinquish might be returned to us anew, enlivened in ways we could never have imagined on our own.

Most importantly, it is a promise from God to us – not from us to God. As author Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, the story of this Gospel is a miracle story. Jesus calls, and the four fishermen “immediately” follow. No hesitation, no questions asked. Is this because they have superhuman courage or they know what lies ahead? Of course not. These are the same guys who will later doubt, deny, and abandon Jesus. They are as imperfect and as ordinary as the rest of us, and their own will can’t get them very far. No, they immediately follow Jesus because Jesus makes it possible for them to do so. “This is not a story about us,” Taylor writes. “It is a story about God, and about God’s ability not only to call us but also to create us as people who are able to follow – able to follow because we cannot take our eyes off the one who calls us, because he interests us more than anything else in our lives, because he seems to know what we hunger for and because he seems to be food.”

I want you to notice something else. Notice that these fishermen were not especially gifted people. In the first century Peter and Andrew, James and John were pretty ordinary, but Jesus asked them to follow anyway. And they went. In fact, the text says they went immediately. They didn’t wait until they had enough money, or enough time, or enough education, or enough talent, or enough information, or even the right tools – they just went. I’m not sure I can state it any more plainly – Jesus called ordinary people right in the middle of their ordinary lives to be in relationship with the ordinary people all around them and through those ordinary people and ordinary experiences, God did and still does *extraordinary* things. God goes to the most ordinary places and finds the most ordinary people and then uses the skills they already possess to transform the world. For some, these skills are earned in years of education and hard work, for others, these skills are earned through experiences of unimaginable suffering and hardship. All of your life is part of your life with God. Everything – even the things you think of as your most colossal failures or your deepest regrets – everything is something God can and will use. God calls every one of us, no matter how ordinary or unqualified or unprepared we think we might be. Our task is simply to decide if we will accept Jesus’ invitation to follow.

My friends, I want to help you imagine and believe that each one of you are worthy of God’s call, and that God is calling you wherever you are *right now* to be one of his disciples. You don’t need any special skills or equipment, and although I don’t know what or where God will call you to, I do know that God is calling – and God will keep calling. And if we’re willing to listen – if we’re willing to trust that it is God’s voice that we hear – then God will *make us* just as God has promised and God will use us in extraordinary ways to transform the world.

And just like all the disciples who have been called before us – if we’re faithful enough to listen and respond, then our lives will never be the same again. “*Follow me and I will make you...*” So, who’s ready to go fishing? Thanks be to God. Amen.