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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
1/26/2014, The Third Sunday after Epiphany  
Matthew 3:13-17  
Constables for Christ

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>18</sup>As [Jesus] walked 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. <sup>19</sup>And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” <sup>20</sup>Immediately they left their nets and followed him.

If you should like a title for this sermon, I call it “Constables for Christ,” for that is what we should be in this world. We are to arrest the sinner, do the best we can to stop him in his tracks, and to haul him off to Jesus. Don’t dare to just let him go, for that cannot be for anyone’s good! And if we ourselves have strayed and fallen short of the dignity we should have as Christians, then we should take ourselves in hand and bring ourselves back to Christ. We are to be fishers of humanity, and as Charles Spurgeon once put it:

Let us ask [Jesus] to give us grace to go a-fishing...<sup>1</sup>

We too are called into the holy discipleship of Jesus Christ. And we too are promised that Jesus intends to make something of us. He means to make us fishers of humanity.

So, those are the two sides of my sermon: call and promise. “Follow me,” says Jesus. That is the call. “... and I will make you fishers of men.” That is the promise. Let’s begin with the call.

## **WE TOO ARE CALLED**

My friend theologian David Yeago once mentioned to me that when it comes to preaching, he is drawn to the writings of Saint Paul “like bees to honey.” I feel the same way when it comes to the stories of Jesus calling his disciples. I am drawn to those stories like bees to honey. I love them. I count them important both for the early church and for you and me.

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<sup>1</sup> “If Christ has caught us, we must catch others. If we have been apprehended of him, we must be his constables, to apprehend rebels for him. Let us ask him to give us grace to go a-fishing...” (Spurgeon, “How To Become Fishers of Men,” 1886)

Why important for you and me? Because I am persuaded that this same Jesus who said to the fisherman long ago, “Follow me,” has also crossed our path and said likewise to us, “Follow me.”

Especially I am speaking now of a concrete event in our lives. I mean our baptisms. If we were baptized as infants I doubt that we can recall that blessed event. And if we were baptized as grown-ups, still, it might have been quite a long time ago, and we might not recall it with any detail. Nonetheless, when it happened, that was when Jesus focused in on us, spoke to us, and said to us, “Follow me.”

If you should ask “How can this be? How can it be that something so important as the call of Saint Peter and Saint Andrew could also have happened to me?” well, the first thing to grasp is that we are talking about the same Jesus Christ. Many years have passed since the call of Christ’s first disciples, even many centuries have passed, yet it is the same Lord Jesus Christ who calls people to be his disciples. He is not old in the sense of being grey-haired and craggy-faced. But he is old in the sense that he is resurrected, and therefore as alive today as he was two thousand years ago when he walked alongside the Sea of Galilee and caught sight of the fishermen, Peter and Andrew. It is the same Jesus Christ who lives today — the one who is constant in character and in goodness:

Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever.  
(Hebrews 13:8, KJV)

He called the fishermen long ago, and he lives to call the people of New York City today.

The second important thing to grasp is that you are not all that different from Peter and Andrew and the rest of the disciples. And I think the Bible wants you to understand that. The Bible pulls no punches in describing the Twelve. They were middlin’ men — at least at the start. The twelve disciples were not like the Knights of the Round Table. They were not renowned for strength and skill like Sir Lancelot, nor for courage and loyalty like Sir Gawain, nor even for purity of heart like Sir Galahad. No, they were just ordinary guys.

Take St. Matthew, for example. He was a tax collector — what the King James Version calls a “publican.” It was a questionable vocation. In fact, in the very next scene after Jesus calls Matthew, we read of the Pharisees grumbling about the disreputable nature of the companions of Jesus

And when the Pharisees saw it, they said unto his disciples,  
Why eateth your Master with publicans and sinners?  
(Matthew 9:11, KJV)

There probably was some justice in the low opinion in which the publicans were held. For example, you might remember from Sunday School days the fun

story of Zacchaeus up there in the sycamore tree. Jesus looks up in the tree and says,

Zacchaeus, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today. (Luke 19:5, RSV)

And the man hops down and gladly hosts Jesus. Again, this sets off complaints from the righteous folk:

<sup>7</sup>And when they saw it they all murmured, “He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.” (Luke 19:7, RSV)

The response of Zacchaeus to this reveals that the righteous ones are probably on to something when they complain about him:

<sup>8</sup>And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold.”

But it is the nature of Jesus to not be overly picky about those he calls to be his disciples. It is a theme repeated throughout the gospels. The Twelve were slow to comprehend Jesus, one of them denied him, one of them betrayed him, and all fled from him and abandoned him in his time of need. It was not for their native excellence that we honor them. It was rather that Jesus called them as they were, and then made something of them, so that we end up calling them “saints.”

This same Jesus lives now and evermore and it remains his desire to call disciples. He wants you, he wants me, he wants the whole wide world.

So, that is my first theme: The same Jesus who called Peter and Andrew long ago lives to call you and me now.

## **FISHERS OF MEN**

And that leads me to my second theme: When Jesus calls us to be his disciples, he does not do so simply for the sake of comforting our souls and getting us back on the right track, but also for the sake of comforting *the world* and getting the world back on track. He wants us to lend a hand to that. He wants us to be his sheriffs to round people up and bring them to him. He wants us to be fishers of humanity.

We saw this same theme last Sunday when we were discussing Israel. Israel is indeed the Chosen People of God, but they are chosen not just for their own sake, but for the sake of the world. Israel and the Church are pragmatic societies. They are after something. They exist that they might grow. They cannot be content to remain alone. They are meant to be fishers of humanity.

When Jesus passed by our seashore, saw us casting our nets into the sea, and called us to follow him, he did so with the intention of making something new of us. Before, we were fishers of fish. Now, we are to become fishers of people. No one who is called by Christ can expect to remain the same, old person. It is not possible — not possible if it is Jesus we are following. Jesus *changes* people. He changes them for the good. He makes them more useful in this world. He makes them a blessing to their neighbors.

## **A LOT OF SADNESS IN OUR WORLD**

Oh! There is so much sadness in this world! There are marriages breaking up, generations who seem not to know any more how to be faithful to one another, discouraged young people encumbered with debt but seeing little way forward, elderly folk wondering whether their final years will find them destitute, people of all ages trapped in drunkenness and vice. The disciples of Jesus cannot be content to let them go in peace, drifting on, many of them, toward the ruination of this life and hell afterwards.

We must organize ourselves both corporately as a congregation and individually as plain Christians out there in the world to try to win souls to Christ. There can be no rest or discharge in this war. Love for our neighbors will not permit it.

Our congregation, for example, has been doing well in recent years in our Sunday School and Children's Choir. I am still tickled to think of Tiffany's note. She is co-director of our Children's Choir along with Jim Miller. Tiffany pointed out to me that four years ago we had eight children in our Christmas pageant. They were beautiful children — that's for sure! — but there were only eight of them. This past Christmas, we had twenty-two children in our Christmas pageant — every one of them beautiful, along with the beauty of their higher number.

And when children come to our Sunday School, they are taken care of by gentle and faithful teachers. Someday those children will grow up, remember their Sunday School teachers with gratitude, say a prayer for them, and quietly acknowledge that they were probably kept from some missteps in life by the gentle influence of their Sunday School teachers. Many of us older folks can say the same thing. Thank God for our Sunday School teachers!

On the congregational level, we are doing well with our Choir, Children's Choir, our liturgy, our Sunday School, our Meals on Heels Saturday lunch program, our long tradition of peace and mutual affection, and the sweetness of our Coffee Hour fellowship. We are doing well at the congregational level and we have the potential to do much, much more. Not all congregations have such potential, but I think we do. To us the Master has entrusted not one talent, nor two, but the five talents spoken of in our Lord's parable. Much as been given to us and much is expected of us.

But we must go beyond our congregation efforts to win souls to Christ. There is our own personal work to do so too. At the end of this liturgy, Assisting Minister Marlene Lund will speak what is perhaps my favorite line in the liturgy:

Go in peace. Serve the Lord.

There we have it — the totality of the Gospel in just a few words. “Go in peace.” Jesus is risen and you belong to him, your Savior. So you can afford to pour out your life in love and good deeds, being a spendthrift in love. You will be okay. Enjoy Christ’s peace then.

And “Serve the Lord.” That’s what you can do that I cannot do for you. I cannot go into your place of work and “serve the Lord” there. You must do that. I cannot enter your home and serve the Lord there. You must do that.

To do it, you should be persistent like the fishermen. They get up early in the morning and cast their nets hour after hour, seeking their fish. Likewise with you. Never give up trying to win souls to Christ. Keep working away at it. You are positioned to reach some of them in a way that no one else is positioned. You are the one who with a few gentle words might save a life and bring that one to Jesus in his holy church.

Let your own walk with Jesus be steady. And if you have fallen behind, then be a good “constable for Christ” and lead yourself back into the holy fellowship with Jesus. Think of him. Read of him. Linger with him. Obey him, lest your disobedience serve as discouragement to others. Seek to live in his Spirit.

Yes, there are fish to be caught in our town, and so Spurgeon’s prayer is forever a good one:

Lord, give us grace to go a-fishing.

There are fish needing to be caught if their catching brings them to Jesus, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.