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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
1/22/2017, The Third Sunday after the Epiphany
Isaiah 9:1-4, Matthew 4:12-23
Discipleship

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

This sermon is about Christian discipleship. Most of the sermon is about the glorious fact that Jesus calls you and me to follow him. Toward the end of the sermon I speak of *why* Jesus would do such a thing. Why is it so important to Jesus that you and I should follow him? I bet you already know the answer to that: It is important to Jesus that you and I should be his disciples because that is where we will be safe. We will be safe in the company of Jesus. So that section toward the end of the sermon will be a section in praise of Christian discipleship. For now, I want to focus on the plain fact that Jesus calls people to himself. Let's begin with the story of Jesus calling his first two disciples. The story goes this way:

¹⁸As [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. ¹⁹And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." ²⁰Immediately they left their nets and followed him. (Matthew 4:18-20, RSV)

To begin exploring this little scene, I want to borrow a line from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, from his important book *The Cost of Discipleship*. The line goes this way:

Peter cannot convert himself, but he can leave his nets.¹

Faith, a transformed heart, a holy life: such things might not be at Peter's command. They are not. They are gifts of the Holy Spirit. But one thing *is* at Peter's command: he can leave his nets. He can obey the call of Jesus. And in obeying, he places himself in the situation in which faith, transformation, and a holy life become possible for him.

Let's back up a bit in the story. This morning's Gospel Lesson begins with the relocation of Jesus from his hometown, Nazareth, to a seaside town called

¹ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Discipleship* DBW Vol 4 (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works) (p. 64). Fortress Press. Kindle Edition.

Capernaum. This becomes the center of life of Jesus and his ministry going forward. He leaves home and builds his own life. No doubt he missed Mary and Joseph and his boyhood neighbors, but he has his own life to live and his own work to do. God bless him for turning to the path he must walk.

St. Matthew, who tells our story, says that the start of our Lord's ministry in Capernaum represented the commencing of a great light in Galilee. Our evangelist says that this great light was in fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah of old:

¹⁶the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light,
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light
has dawned." (Matthew 4:16, RSV)

What a sweet words these are! "For those who sat in the region and the shadow of death light has dawned." We know something of that region – that land dimmed by "the shadow of death" and by all those disappointments in life that shadow us and diminish our chances. The Twenty-third Psalm had spoken of such dark shadows:

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of
death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; (Psalm 23:4,
KJV)

Now, with the start of the preaching of Jesus in Galilee, light has dawned in a dim world. "I will fear no evil: for thou are with me." Jesus is really *with* the people. The Lord is really there, with the people. They can go to him if they want. They can follow him if they want. And Peter and Andrew do that. Jesus calls them, and up they go. They leave their nets and follow the One who brings a great light into a dark world.

In this morning's Gospel Lesson, *this* happened, and then *that* happened. What I want is that we should see the interconnection between the two. So, *this* happened: Jesus preached repentance and the coming of God's kingdom:

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Matthew
4:17, RSV)

And then, *that* happened. Jesus began to call disciples to himself:

¹⁹And [Jesus] said to [Peter and Andrew], "Follow me, and
I will make you fishers of men." ²⁰Immediately they left
their nets and followed him.

One thing follows the other: Jesus preaches repentance and God's kingdom, *and* Jesus calls disciples. My theme is that these two are connected. The connection goes this way: If we would repent, and if we would let the life-giving reign of God into our lives, then we should become the disciples of Jesus. We should leave our nets, leave our tax-collection booth, leave our sycamore tree, and we should follow Jesus. Living with Jesus is the path of repentance for us. Living with Jesus is giving God's good reign sway in our lives. And those who live with Jesus commence the path of faith, of transformation, and of holiness. They need fear no evil in this world, for Jesus is with them and they are with him.

Discipleship is not optional for the Christian. That band of Christians called "The Disciples of Christ" is a church in the Reformed tradition, and so Lutherans have their traditional theological controversies with them. But one good thing we can say about them: They got their name right! To be a Christian is to be a disciple of Christ. Apart from getting up from our old ways, and walking with Jesus, nothing else makes sense – not even justification by faith.

There is a striking line in a recent lecture by theologian David Yeago that makes this point. David is writing about Christian discipleship, developing the theme that Jesus is at the heart of our faith and that if Jesus is not the Lord of our lives, then nothing else makes sense. His line goes this:

If the definition of forgiveness by the concrete particularity of Jesus Christ is not at least suggested in context, then "You are forgiven" is no more the gospel than "You are the King of France." Saying it doesn't make it so; the living Jesus Christ makes it so...What faith believes is not "I am forgiven" but "the living Christ is my Lord."²

Bonhoeffer makes a similar claim:

As long as Levi sits in the tax collector's booth and Peter at his nets, they would do their work honestly and loyally, they would have old or new knowledge about God. But if they want to learn to believe in God, they have to follow the Son of God incarnate and walk with him.³

² David S. Yeago, "Justification, Discipleship, and the Preaching of Christ ." The North American Lutheran Church Atlantic District Clergy Conference October 17, 2015

³ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. Discipleship DBW Vol 4 (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works) (p. 62). Fortress Press. Kindle Edition.

Faith is not a head trip. Faith is beginning life anew. Faith is walking with Jesus. It is not a new idea – not even a true idea. Rather, faith is a new manner of life. If the tax collector remains in his booth and Peter remains at his nets, both can be good and honorable people. But they will not be the people our Maker is after. He is after those who set out on an adventure – the adventure of walking with Jesus, in his ways and with his spirit.

So, Peter cannot convert himself, but Peter can leave his nets. And in leaving his nets in order to draw closer to Jesus, Peter begins the movement from fisherman to apostle, from sinner to saint.

Bonhoeffer spells this out in simple pastoral terms:

Come to the church! You can do that on the strength of your human freedom. You can leave your house on Sunday and go to hear the preaching. If you do not do it, then you willfully exclude yourself from the place where faith is possible.⁴

Let me try my hand at continuing along these lines. What I am trying to do is to give you a vision, maybe even a method or principle, for being a disciple of Jesus Christ. I mean a disciple not only here in church on Sunday morning, but day by day, out there in the world.

Let me begin with a gesture you might have noticed many times. It takes place during the Gospel Procession. As I announce the Holy Gospel, I make the sign of the Cross on myself three times. You may do this too. Many Christians do. At the words, “The Holy Gospel According to St. Matthew,” I quietly trace the sign of the cross on my forehead, on my lips, and on my chest. I do not know whether there are proper liturgical words to be saying to myself at that point, but I can tell you what I in fact whisper to myself, “Let this holy Gospel be in my + mind, on my + lips, and in my + heart.

It is that last part that I want to lift up for you now. You young people in the Masters Singers Chorale from Mattawan High School in Michigan... you young people still have a chance to make up your minds about what kind of people you want to be in this world. I am urging you to be people with a new kind of heart — a heart with Jesus in it. We old dogs, with grey or white hair, it is not *too late* for us. When we leave this church on Sunday and go out into the world, we can work at carrying with us a new kind of heart in this world — a heart that beats for Jesus. That is what disciples are like. They are mindful of Jesus. They bear him in mind and seek to become more like the One they call Master. Let us, let each of us in this place, be among them. Let us be among the disciples. Let us be among those whose heart beats for Jesus.

⁴ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Discipleship DBW Vol 4 (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works)* (pp. 64-65). Fortress Press. Kindle Edition.

Is there some habit of disobedience in your life? If you are honest with yourself, is there some way in which you are in rebellion against Jesus and his ways? Is it alcohol? Adultery? Pornography? Bitterness toward an enemy or a relative? Near indifference toward your neighbors and the poor of the land? Are you a pirate, a bank robber, an abuser of your spouse, a neglecter of your children? If so, leave your nets behind. Get up and follow Jesus. If you are having trouble coming to faith in Jesus, trying obeying him some more. In that way, you open the door to faith. It is as Jesus says in his Sermon on the Mount:

²³So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. (Matthew 5:23-24, NRSV)

So if bitterness of soul is disturbing your discipleship, go and be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and follow Jesus. For he is calling you. He is calling you here and now in this sermon. He will call you in every liturgy in church. He will call you as long as you still have some years before you and some breath in your body.

After all, how can Jesus stop himself from calling you into his discipleship? You are precious to him. He cannot simply let you wander out there in a dangerous world. You and I: we are like that one sheep of which Jesus speaks – that one sheep for whose sake the Good Shepherd leaves the ninety-and-nine and goes out and searches for the one that is straying. There are wolves out there. There are cliffs the poor sheep can fall from. There are arid places with no nourishment for the creature. Jesus cannot rest content that you and I should wander into the howling wilderness. With him there is life! Jesus is not some thief who comes to diminish our lives, but rather to make life richer for us:

The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly. (John 10:10, KJV)

It is the most tender of compassion that Jesus calls us to leave our nets and follow him. He wants only our good. And so he wants us! He wants us to walk with him.

It is another whole story and another whole sermon to note that in the Bible, being a disciple of Jesus does not automatically make a person perfect. In a way, I love how thick-headed the Twelve are, how slow to learn, how fickle they are – the way even Peter, their leader, can swear that he will never deny Jesus, but he does it nonetheless. No, following Jesus does not make us

saints right off the bat. But it gives us a chance. Coming to church, receiving the sacraments, learning of Jesus, reading the Bible, imitating Jesus, practicing his ways, loving our neighbors, forgiving our enemies... all of these things, these forms of walking with Jesus, are the real thing in life! They place us in fellowship with Jesus, and in doing so, they place us beside the very Savior of our lives and souls, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.