Our Gospel text:

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” Simon answered, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.” When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who are partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him. (Luke 5:1-11)

Grace, Mercy and Peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

It is a pleasure to be with you on a wonderful day of celebrating the Ordination of Caleb Douglas. I am thankful for the opportunities you have provided for Caleb and his family. I know they have been blessed by this experience and I trust they have also been a blessing to you and the entire congregation of Immanuel. I am certain that Caleb will continue to bless you as a Pastor of the Church and as one of your pastors in these months to come. Thank you, Pastor Fryer, for your gracious invitation to be with you today and for your faithful witness as a congregation of the North American Lutheran Church. May the Lord continue to bless and strengthen you as you serve Him offering His gracious love to countless others in your ministry.
For now, we turn our attention to the Gospel for today. During this season of Epiphany, the light of the Gospel texts reveals the true identity of Jesus. Luke focuses his Gospel on the identity of Jesus from beginning to end. Even in the announcement of His birth to Mary and Joseph, angels bring the message and proclaim his identity. As He begins His public ministry Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan and we hear the voice of the Holy Spirit affirming Jesus as the Son of God. His miracle at the wedding in Cana, turning water into wine, affirms His identity and causes his disciples to believe in Him. Today Jesus capacity for the miraculous occurs in the catch of fish as He prepares to call His first disciples. Jesus teaches as one with authority and power, unlike other teachers. The people observe that even the unclean spirits know who He is and are subject to His authority. It is important to point out that we can become so caught up in the appearance of angels, voices from heaven, the unclean spirits and the catch of fish that we miss the real focus of the Gospel, Jesus Christ. It is not the phenomenon, it’s the person that truly matters.

Luke wants us to know that this Jesus of Nazareth is the compassionate Savior of the world. His love and compassion are for all people: rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, the marginalized and those in power, the oppressed and those who are affirmed. He is a friend of outcasts. Jesus is one to whom the social boundaries of polite society were irrelevant, but he is relevant to people from all backgrounds.

Jesus is a teacher who both proclaims and demonstrates Grace. Jesus is fully connected to his Jewish roots and the Temple. He is God’s anointed one, the Messiah, the Christ. Jesus is the fulfillment of all that God promised to his people and to the entire world in the Old Testament. Luke makes it clear that in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the Kingdom of Heaven breaks into our world. No one can read the Gospel of Luke and miss his focus on Jesus as divine, the Son of the Most High God. Let us look closely at the miracle before us in this Gospel text.

Jesus approaches Peter asking only for the chance to borrow his boat. Peter pushes out his boat so the crowd could see and hear Jesus. As he teaches, Jesus is not speaking directly to Peter. Peter is busy with his nets. He is just close enough to overhear what Jesus is saying. Jesus doesn’t quiz Peter about his teaching. Jesus notices what Peter knows all too well. There are no fish in the boat, only empty nets. If you are a fisherman and you don’t catch fish, soon there is no money in the bank, nor food on the table. Jesus senses Peter’s loss and disappointment that are perhaps, keeping his words from taking root in Peter’s heart. Jesus gives him two commands: “Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.” What will Peter do? It is the point of vacillation. Peter has some respect for Jesus he calls him Master. Then he moves away
from Jesus. He says, in effect, I’m tired. I’ve fished in these waters all night and came up empty. There are no fish here! You may be a great teacher, but I am the fisherman here and you are in my boat. (You stick to teaching and let me do the fishing!) The question is, which source of authority am I going to follow, myself or the one making this offer or invitation. I think Peter may have been thinking I’ll prove to him that he knows nothing about fishing or maybe He knows something that I don’t. In spite of this inner conflict and resistance, Peter concludes with a word of impending obedience. “Because you say so, I will let down the nets.” In that moment the invitation of Jesus became Peter’s will. Peter trusts Jesus, believes His word and follow his instructions. He chose the authority of Jesus over his own. It was at that point that Peter took the first step in becoming a disciple by responding to the invitation and offer of Jesus.

You know what happens next. The nets begin to fill with fish, so many fish that the nets are breaking, and they can’t fit all the fish in one boat. Peter has to call for help from James and John. The fill the second boat and both boats are now so full of fish they can hardly get them back to shore.

When they finally get back to shore, Peter falls at the feet of Jesus and says, Lord you don’t want to have anything to do with me. I am a sinful man. Peter is so overwhelmed by Jesus attention and care that he starts to retreat, to pull away from Jesus. But Jesus pursues him with another invitation. “Don’t be afraid, from now on you will be catching people.” And they left everything behind and followed Jesus.

What can we learn from this text about being disciples of Jesus today? This is the methodology Jesus used. Jesus focused on the individual, on Peter in this case. Jesus moved in Peter’s direction. He got into his boat. Today as we hear this text we realize that Jesus is in our boat and he is challenging us, if we are to make disciples, to be willing to climb into another person’s “boat” or life. He engaged Peter in conversation that was sensitive to Peter’s needs, problems and disappointments. Jesus then offers an invitation and He gives them an opportunity to respond obediently to His invitation. Then Jesus creates an amazing atmosphere that is filled with wonder, an atmosphere that is filled with encouragement and hope. This is how all true evangelism and discipleship must begin.

The focus is on the relationship with Jesus. Jesus did not offer these followers, powerful programs, or attractive mission statements, innovative ministry, creative theologies, dogmatic formulas, practical advice for success, institutional strength or organizational effectiveness. Jesus offered them only one thing. He offered them Himself! You want to follow Jesus – you get Jesus
and His Body, the Church. That’s it but then, that’s everything. Jesus is the content of the call!

Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us that faith is born in the first step of an obedient response to the call of Jesus. He writes, “Unless a definite step is demanded, the call vanishes into thin air and if men imagine that they can follow Jesus without taking this step, they are deluding themselves like fanatics.”

Discipleship is like the process of learning to walk. I have been privileged to recently watch my grandchildren experience that process. First a child learns to roll over. They learn to scoot and then to crawl and when they get tired of staring at the floor, they begin to pull themselves up and stand. This gives them an entirely new perspective. If you have taken time to notice they stand with their feet apart center of gravity low to the ground. (Perfect stand for a football player to avoid getting knocked over.) You will also notice how they look at you when you suggest that they take a step. Put all their weight on one foot, going from a position of perfect balance and stability to one of the most vulnerable positions possible. Every parent knows that by inviting them to walk you know they are going to fall. The biblical witness is that the disciples fell many times in their learning to walk with Jesus. But no parent would ever think of avoiding the risk by never letting them learn to walk. Nor can any Pastor encourage their people to avoid discipleship as a way to play it safe. Everyone who follows Jesus falls and fails. It is a process that demands vulnerability, patience and endurance. It is not a matter of perfection but of faithfulness in following Jesus.

The goal of Christian faith is following Jesus, by loving Him, serving Him by serving others and by being obedient to all that he has commanded. Discipleship is not a matter of dropping people off at destination but a matter of walking with them on a life-long journey of following Jesus.

We are right to be concerned about “decision theology” that makes our decisions seem more important than Jesus cross and resurrection. Following Jesus is more a matter of identity than just a decision. In Baptism we are claimed by Christ. We become a child of God and part of God’s family. As members of the Body of Christ, there are responsibilities and commitments as there are in any family, that will involve us in making a multitude of daily decisions because of identity as members of the family, as disciples of Jesus. Those decisions can never undermine the greatest decision of all, the decision God made to love us and send His only Son to be our Savior and the only source for our redemption and forgiveness. As His disciples the focus is on Jesus from beginning to end. But such faith does not do away with Jesus
expectation to live this faith by making decision that are obedient to all that He commands.

If a person becomes a pilot, his or her identity requires that they make decisions consistent with their identity. A person can’t claim to be a pilot if they stay on the ground. In order to live their identity, they have to pilot a plane. In the cockpit they have to make a multitude of decisions and as their plane is rumbling down the runway they will reach the point where they can no longer remain on the ground. They must get the plane off the ground. At that point their identity requires a total commitment. If they vacillate at that point it could cost everyone onboard their life.

Jesus understood the nature of the weight of such commitment when he entered the garden the night before he was to be crucified. He knew what was before Him. He knew what the future held. He was on the runway. Time was passing – and it was clear that His commitment was to remain faithful to his identity as the Son of God and the Savior of the world. This was His commitment “Father, if You are willing, take this cup away from Me — nevertheless, not My will, but Yours, be done.” Luke 22:42. Jesus modeled a relationship with the Father that was faithful to His identity. It was complete commitment even when it was leading to a cross, to His suffering and death. It was a commitment to you and to me, to all who follow him by faith. It was a commitment to sacrifice His life for your sins and mine, for the forgiveness and redemption of all who would accept this gift of Grace through faith in Him.

Jesus taught his disciples and modeled in his life, that commitment is always costly. For that reason, love always involves us in costly commitment. Can you think of any love relationship that does not require commitment or that is not costly? If you can I will guarantee that it is not a genuine loving relationship.

Dallas Willard, who was a good friend of mine writes about discipleship this way: “Being a disciple of Jesus is not some strange and mysterious thing, it is very practical, definitive and obvious. Being a disciple of Jesus is very similar to becoming an apprentice. Has anyone here been an apprentice for any trade? Plumbers, tool and die, machinists, electricians, are all examples and I am sure there are others. Let us suppose you were becoming an apprentice carpenter. What would you need to do in order to be successful under the mentoring of the experienced carpenter? You would have to spend time with him. You would have to listen closely to him. You would have to be obedient to what he asked you to do. You would have to be open to learn from him. You would have to put into practice the things you were learning. Being a disciple of Jesus involves those same practical and logical steps.” These are the same
things the first disciples did. These are the same instructions Jesus gave to his disciples. These are the same things that the early church put into practice as they helped others to connect with Jesus and become His disciples.

As followers of Jesus we are committed to helping others to experience Jesus call to follow Him. He comes to them as He came to us, through the work of the Holy Spirit, in Word and Sacrament, in worship, fellowship and the loving care we offer to them in His name.

May we also renew our commitment to walk with those who are just learning what it means to follow Jesus, learning with them, growing with them, struggling with them to be obedient to all that Jesus commands, not just to have faith but to live the faith.

When I teach about discipleship, I always ask the question, if after hearing the invitation of Jesus to follow him had Peter, James, John said this has been a great experience but no thank you, would they still have been considered disciples? They didn’t ask Jesus for an itinerary of their journey. They didn’t ask when they would be able to return to life as normal. They didn’t know if they were just going out for a quick overnight or weekend experience. I wonder if Jesus would have tried to explain everything that was coming in their future with Him if they would have gone with Jesus. I wonder if he would have told them this was going to be a three-year process filled with many ups and downs and would eventually result in the death of Jesus and down the road a little farther their death for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven Jesus was proclaiming if they would have ever taken that first step! What is amazing is that they went! They left their nets and boats and began the journey of following Jesus.

The greater miracle in this Gospel is not the great catch of fish. It is the fact that Jesus counted people like Peter James and John as those worthy of His invitation to be His disciples, and they followed Him.

It has everything to do with our life on this day when we hear these words from the Gospel, because through this Word Jesus is calling us, counting us as worthy to also be His disciples. He offers us that same invitation as He responds to our deepest needs. We come together to receive His encouragement in this community of faith to take the next step in obediently following Him and doing all we can to ensure that others have that same opportunity. May we respond just like Peter James and John!

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