

Inviting Disciples

Third Sunday after Epiphany
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Psalm 62:5-12;
1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

Grace, mercy, and peace to you, from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Some years ago, a news release reported that pelicans were fishing off the coast of California. That was fine. Except for the fact that working in the same area were a number of fishing boats. The men on the boats were cleaning their catch and leaving the parts they couldn't sell, throwing them back into the ocean at the water's edge.

The pelicans, being far from stupid birds, observed what was happening and decided that they could just eat the waste without having to work any harder to get their food. So for weeks, upon weeks, upon weeks, they waited for the fishing boats to come. But after a while, the fishermen discovered that the waste could be sold also. When they stopped dropping the fish waste into the sea, it caught the pelicans quite unprepared. They just sat there . . . on the shore . . . and waited . . . and waited . . . and waited. And grew thinner and skinnier and scrapper day by day. And seemed there was nothing to be done about their sad plight.

Why? Well, the authorities finally concluded it was because the birds had forgotten how to fish (like kiwis, who have forgotten how to fly). Then a wildlife official hit upon a plan. He suggested that what they should do is capture some pelicans from another area in California, bring them down to where this problem was, and mix them with the pelicans that were already there. And maybe, since they were smart birds, they would observe their fellow birds fishing, and take up looking and hunting for their own fish again.

Almost two thousand years before that, it is recorded for us that the people of God, the chosen ones, had forgotten the core of their identity, and they ended up oppressed by kings and priests, and a brutal Roman army of occupation. It was as if they had forgotten how to sustain their lives through obedience to God. But God had a plan. He, Himself, became a human being and dwelt among them as Jesus, to show them and to lead them back to a life of faith in God. It was an enormous task. And to assist in the task and to ensure it continued into the far distant future, Jesus sought out assistants – students, learners, disciples, if you will.

And here we are. Gathered together at the beginning of another year. But do you know what's amazing about that? We continue in that long line of disciples, because that's what we are.

Oh I know the term carries all sorts of baggage, because of all the nonsense and stuff that's been done by people who claim to be disciples, and make so much noise about it they've almost perverted the term itself. I call for us to restore the term to its original meaning, and to live into it as Christ in His calling would have us do when we seek to live out our baptism.

Later this morning we will hold our annual congregational meeting, reviewing our past performance. And in a tiny red book, which is only the tip of the iceberg, we begin to see what God is about in our midst, and what you have taken part in through the year. And at that same meeting, we'll consider our service to God through Christ for the future. And man, what a future it is! You and I, giving thanks to God for what He has accomplished through us, and preparing for Him to lead us into a new and exciting future.

Just so Jesus put His team together. But what's fascinating in this morning's gospel is that Jesus did not let it be generally known He was looking for help – He didn't put posters up on the trees. He didn't write up a job description. Instead, what He did was to approach the most ordinary people from Galilee. He gave them no command, issued no instruction, but invited them – “follow me.” That's how it is, you see. That's how it's always been. Jesus approaches ordinary people and invites them to join Him, to participate in what is the emergence of the kingdom of God.

Just as the wildlife experts realized the pelicans needed to be reeducated and retrained to feed themselves by fishing, God understood that His chosen people needed strong leaders and role models to bring them back to Him and His ways, and who would have strength enough to go outside the boundaries of the chosen people and offer the good news and salvation to the gentiles, beloved, to us.

So Jesus arrives and begins His ministry. Fresh from the wilderness testing by Satan, filled and empowered with the Holy Spirit, Jesus sets out on His public ministry. He proclaims that the Kingdom of God is at hand; the Kingdom is near, and the fullness of time has come into being. When people heard Jesus' message they were to repent of false assumptions and wrongdoings, and turn to God and trust in the good news, and move forward in their lives in new ways. "The kingdom of God has come near."

"The kingdom of God has come near." You know, that's one of the great themes of the Bible. It's a central theme in Mark's summary of Jesus' message. It's prominent, don't you recall, in the Lord's Prayer. What is it we say? “Thy kingdom come.” Not to mention its frequent recurrence in Jesus' parables. But listen to what it says, and what it is. The proclamation, "the kingdom of God," draws the battle lines. It describes the struggle in which Jesus is about to engage – for what does the image of a kingdom evoke but notions of empire and power and rule, in the midst of the Jewish war with Rome in the late 60's. Mark's readers would have heard this talk of empire from a Jewish Galilean peasant as a bold, maybe even foolish, challenge to the oppressive power of the Roman Empire.

Rome had just crushed the Jewish resistance in Jerusalem. The city of God's promised hope lay in ruins. The temple of God's promised *shalom* was in flames. To proclaim God's power, and not the power of Rome, in Mark's context, was for all people of God, good news, and darned good news at that.

So Jesus set out on His mission and ministry. Unlike all the other teachers or philosophers, He wasn't the only bright spot that shone. Unlike the other contemporary teachers and philosophers who competed amongst themselves to attract students, to attract followers, to attract disciples,

Jesus, as Mark presents Him, is one who just invites. Calmly, quietly, simply. And his invitation is not refused.

Think of it. I grew up in a fishing village. I like to think of this myself, some other person from the port walking along. So Jesus walks along the shore of Galilee and approaches Simon and Andrew, almost immediately following, James and John. Jesus doesn't command, He simply invites them to follow him. And in the case of Simon and Andrew, mumbled something about to them about now fishing for people rather than fish.

So they leave occupation, family, home, and property – think about that – and they set out on an entirely new life. Jesus simply invites four local fishermen to become His followers, His disciples, and as we shall see as the gospel unfolds, His students.

Which is exactly what happens to us. Called into, through, and out of our baptism, we are by no means finished disciples. But the rest of the way we live out our lives will help us as we grow and form. You see, God doesn't have a blueprint for you. Instead what you've got is a 60" by 30" sheet of white paper and a set of pencils, and you're invited to make the picture of your life, whatever it will be, for His sake and to God's glory.

Do you notice how different this is from the way we often think about such things? You see, we can't escape it. We're consumers in a consumer society which has been enthralled by the notion that everything, everything – including faith – needs to be packaged and marketed in order to attract people. That's so far from Jesus' thinking it's almost impossible to believe. Instead of packaging something, instead of persuading, instead of the ritz and the glitz, Jesus offers an astounding simple invitation: "Follow me."

I think one of the most well-known groups that pursue this notion of looking for converts are the Mormons. Did you know that studies have shown that it takes a thousand visits to get one member? But then the Mormons came upon a different way of doing things, and invited people to a meal in their home, where they shared their faith around the table in good fellowship. And the numbers changed dramatically to 50% of people converting to Mormonism. Do you see, beloved, how powerful an invitation can be?

Jesus' invitation is responded to without hesitation by the fisherman. We wonder to ourselves why, but Mark doesn't tell us. We might suppose, I guess, that they thought joining up with Jesus was some sort of a promotion, a step to bigger and better things, but there is nothing in the gospel to suggest that they ever received any reward for their discipleship. Indeed, when James and John later approach Jesus with a request about sitting near Him in His glory, He sharply rebuked them. What disciples are promised, in fact, is persecution and conflict.

From the point of view of the fishermen, in fact, they are giving up an occupation with a secure market for one that is ill defined at best. It is not even clear that the fishermen respond out of faith. They are not said to believe in Jesus, or to understand His mission. As the story unfolds, these important characters persistently misunderstand Jesus, as we'll see through the year as we follow this gospel. And in the end, they disappear entirely when Jesus is crucified.

Whatever they understand or believe at this point in Mark's story, they eventually forget. Nothing in the reading tells us why the fishermen do what they do. Somehow they were compelled to follow Him, a man whom they cannot understand, on a journey that will perplex and confuse them, to a destination as yet unspecified. And it has not changed.

I don't want you to think that Jesus is being passive or that these disciples are passive and sit around waiting for something to happen. No. They pick themselves up and they go at it to do their best with what they think they ought to do in response to the love that God has shown them in Christ, even when they get it wrong.

What was it Martin Luther told us to encourage us? "Sin boldly." Oh he didn't mean to go out to the fleshpots in town and have a high old time. What he meant was, we try to discern what we ought to be doing with our discipleship and our ministry, and we go ahead and do it. And if it's a disaster and a failure, that's not a problem.

Sin boldly. Go ahead boldly. For the evaluation of our ministry and our discipleship bears absolutely no resemblance to the way the world evaluates anything else. You can't find the success of a congregation by looking at a bunch of numbers. The success of a congregation has nothing to do with numbers, but everything to do with faithfulness, and it's a faithfulness that will risk getting it wrong for the sake of being faithful.

The fishermen (now disciples) act in faith. Now notice, it's not a faith that understands, it's not a faith that takes only calculated risks, it's not a faith focused on reward, but it's a faith that responds to a call that comes to them from outside themselves, and it remains tantalizingly unclear, and at times even terrifying. The journey of faith begins with this step, as does the ministry of Jesus. Responding to Jesus provides the disciples with no answers for their personal struggles, only questions. It provides them with no security, but rather with rejection and even danger. The identity of the One who calls them seems to remain concealed and misunderstood, even by them. Nevertheless, they respond and "follow Him."

Sounds something like us, wouldn't you say? We have come to the end of a year and we are setting about, not only to prepare for a new year, but to begin the journey toward a new ministry at Trinity. That is at one and the same time immensely exciting and somewhat sobering. Undertaken with faith, with trust in God revealed in Christ, such a venture is something like repentance, which brings about a complete change in life. You see, when we repent, God also calls us to a new mission. The Kingdom of God is here already and yet still to come, and it will be signaled by people whose words, actions, and service are done for the sake of Christ. And that, beloved, is what we call discipleship – what you do, what you chose to do with your understanding and your talents and your life and your time for the sake of Christ who gave His life for you and demonstrates God's great love of you.

But our following Christ, our discipleship, doesn't occur in a vacuum. Remember Jesus' words, "the time is fulfilled." He's not talking about tick-tock clock time, that's "*chronos*," what He's talking about is an opportune time, a special time, and "*kairos*," in the Greek. Whatever the year or month or day, wherever the place; whoever may be in control or under control; suddenly or slowly, noisily or quietly, God acts, Jesus appears, and it is *kairos*.

In today's Old Testament reading, Jonah was astounded that Nineveh knew it. And in the reading from First Corinthians, Paul knew it too. In fact, everyone who hears and believes the good news experiences this kind of time. Even though we pray every Sunday that God's kingdom will come, is that really what we're asking for? I think we suppose that it is far in the future, and not really a pressing matter for right now. In fact, Jesus tried to convince people that the kingdom was so near that it was already a reality in this world. That's why Jesus is sometimes credited with saying the kingdom is here, but is still in the future. What is it that we as Lutherans say? The kingdom of God is already, but not yet fulfilled. God's dominion hovers nearby, breaking in at unexpected times. The kingdom comes at times like these, through your discipleship, when the hungry are fed, when the naked clothed. It comes when nations finally settle down to the real work of peace and develop an accord that sticks. It comes when the depressed and dejected hear a word of genuine love. And it comes when an old pastor retires and a new pastor arrives. You see, the rule of God is always and ever present; it's present whenever Christians embody it in their living and in their lives.

And that's what happened to the pelicans, you see. It came to be among the pelicans of California when that new, strange flock moved in among them. Now not being stupid birds, they observed what was going on and slowly, almost miraculously, they realized an old and familiar life in a new way, and once again they began to fish.

Amen.