

Matthew 4:12-23 (NRSV)

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

"Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the
Gentiles--
the 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."

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

As he 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. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

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

I think every pastor who reads this story wonders what Jesus actually said to get these guys to drop their nets, leave their boats and their father and follow him. I mean really, OK, it's a clever line, "Hey fishermen, follow me and I'll make you fish for

people.” If that worked, we could try the same idea with different jobs – “Hey police officers, follow me and we’ll pull ‘em over,” “Hey farmers, follow me and we’ll get a bumper crop,” “Hey, miners, can you dig it?”

But as I thought about it a little more, I thought of something that was a little scary – what if it worked? What if we went out on the street and said, “Hey you people, drop everything and follow us,” and people did just that. Yikes. What would we do? We’d have all these people around to feed and to teach and to lead, and we’d have the responsibility of trying to make sure that people who dropped everything and followed us got something worthwhile.

In fact, until we have that worked out, we should maybe be glad that people *don’t* generally just drop everything and follow us. Because, until we know where we are going, people who just drop everything and follow us will wind up walking around in circles.

Thank goodness, then, that Jesus doesn’t just leave us to figure this out on our own. When Jesus calls his disciples, what does he do with them? Well, the next line in the Gospel reading tells us that he teaches in the synagogues, proclaims the good news of the kingdom, cures every disease and every sickness. That is, he models for them what disciples do, and he teaches them to do it, too. The very next thing that happens in Matthew’s Gospel is the Sermon on the Mount, and it goes from Chapter 5 to Chapter 7. If you read the start of the Sermon on the Mount carefully, Jesus looks at the crowds, goes up the mountain, sits down and his disciples come to him. Then Jesus begins to speak and teaches them – that is, teaches the *disciples*. The Sermon on the Mount is mainly directed to the disciples. You can look it up, Chapter 5, verses 1 and 2.

After that, he goes around healing and teaching and mostly he is actually teaching the disciples themselves. We know this because in Chapter 10, when the disciples have been trained up a little bit, he calls them apostles and sends them out to do what he has been doing. He gives them authority over unclean spirits and the ability to cure every type of disease and proclaim the good news. Take no pay he tells them, but also take no money, no spare clothes. Eat what you are given, stay where you are put and preach the Kingdom.

Wow. That was the fastest apprenticeship in history. Now, we know that the apostles aren't perfect disciples by Chapter 10 of Matthew's Gospel. My goodness, we aren't even halfway through Matthew's Gospel and they have time to make a million mistakes yet, and they do. But they are good enough in Jesus' eyes to be apostles, to be sent out to represent this new Kingdom to the people.

Now ask yourself this – do we have anywhere near the clarity of vision that Jesus had in training his disciples? Try the following exercise. I'm going to start a sentence: "Mature disciples at Saint Nicholas Lutheran Church are people who:" and you fill in the blank. Go ahead, just shout it out: "Mature disciples at Saint Nicholas Lutheran Church are people who:" do what?

(Take some comments)

Note a couple of things. First, we aren't absolutely sure what a disciple is. Some of us think one set of things, others think other things and some of us aren't sure. If our central mission is making disciples, shouldn't we agree on what disciples are? I mean, if we're making red jello, a time-honored vocation of Lutherans, we need to know what red jello is, right? Would making disciples be any different?

Second, let's say we agree that all of the things we have been talking about are characteristics of disciples. Disciples attend worship, they commune regularly, they read the Bible, they teach, they serve the community. What are we doing to train people to do these things? If these are the most important things that disciples do, shouldn't we be teaching people to do them?

Now, to be sure, we are training some people to do some of these things. For example, we are training our confirmands to listen to sermons. Both Pastor Wendy and I do forms for sermon notes and the confirmands fill out sermon notes for at least 6 sermons a year. I know that some confirmands do a lot more than 6 sermon notes a year. We craft the questions on the sermon notes for that particular sermon, so that if the confirmands get the answers right, they will also get the main ideas of the sermon. And here's the thing – the confirmands almost always get the answers right, which means they almost always get the main points of the sermon, at least on the days that they fill out the forms. On the days that they don't fill out the form, I'm less sure but that's a different topic.

We actually do an excellent job of teaching our confirmands, a far better job than we had been doing in teaching our adult members. Now, this is starting to change. We're starting new Sunday school classes, we've got a book group, and some of our members are starting to get together in small groups. I think all of these are absolutely wonderful developments, and they've been happening more or less under the radar. We need to do all we can to encourage these kinds of things.

Discipleship training doesn't have to be dull or painful. We said disciples read the Bible. One of our best activities for encouraging Bible reading happened here just two days ago – the Bible Bowl. Every year this is an enormous amount of fun, and all of the people involved do a lot of reading of the Gospel for that

year, which supports both Biblical literacy and sermon comprehension, because the people who've read the Gospel for that year will know the texts we'll be preaching on.

The point is, we do a lot of things that teach discipleship but I'm not sure that we do it as explicitly or intentionally as we could. A little bit later on we'll be installing our congregation's leaders, our members of Council and our Ministry Sponsors. And for the first time that I know of, this past December we had an orientation meeting for the new Council members to let them know what Council members do. That's a good thing, and I know we'll be doing some ongoing education with and for them. We'll be having a leadership retreat next weekend where we're going to work on defining a clear and simple process for how we form disciples at Saint Nicholas. I'm sure it will take us more than one day, but we'll get a good start.

So, in sum, I'm praying and planning that when we ever get so filled with the Spirit that we can go out in the street and say, "Hey, drop everything and follow us," and people actually do it, that they and we will be glad that they did, that they and we will be transformed, that they and we will truly become disciples. May God be praised!

Amen.