

January 23, 2011

3rd Sunday after the Epiphany

Isaiah 9:1-4 Isaiah reports that God calls Israel the light to the nations

Psalms 27 The Lord is my light and my salvation

I Corinthians 1:10-18 Paul identifies some serious problems in the Corinthian church and reminds them of the basics of being a follower of Jesus

Matthew 4:12-23 Jesus begins his ministry and calls two sets of brothers as his first disciples.

Jesus, Always the Teacher

This gospel lesson offers a variety of themes on which to base a sermon. Some of the sermon titles being used today are, “Let’s Go Fishing”, “How is God Calling You?”, “Drop Everything”. The call to follow Jesus is the centerpiece of the passage, set within the larger context of Jesus’ ministry. Two things are clear to me: first, Matthew is describing how Jesus began laying the groundwork for getting out the message he was bringing. He established his home base, in Capernaum, independent of his family. He was the light that came into the world referred to by Isaiah.

Second, he began by asking ordinary people to be on his leadership team. He didn’t ask if they had prior experience or particular preparation. He simply invited them to follow him. He stated his goal right up front. “I will teach you how to fish for people.”

Think back for a moment to the reading this morning from I Corinthians. A fledgling church received a letter from its founder appealing to them to work together, overcoming their tendency to imitate the culture-at-large by dividing themselves into groups arguing against each other. Paul reminded them that he had come to them to preach the gospel, this same gospel we hear proclaimed in Matthew. The sharing of the story, telling the good news that God’s realm has come near, drawing others near remains the core purpose for those who follow Jesus, and then teaching them what it means and how to live by it.

Regardless of how we came to the conclusion that we will be identified as Christian we answered the call to follow Christ. So, one thing to take away from today’s service is recalling or identifying when that was and the circumstances surrounding it. It really is a two-step process. The first is the response to Jesus’ invitation, but that’s not the end of it.

Then comes the learning and training that we need as disciples. It is always appropriate to stop and examine our effort to follow Jesus. We must move ourselves from the center of our world and give God that place. The lure of a life centered on ourselves and our achievements is very strong and most Christians

admit to some struggle. Part of an assessment will be to note how much time we spend in the classroom, a metaphor for placing ourselves at the disposal of Jesus, The Teacher. You see, Jesus knows we all come just the way Peter, Andrew, James and John came, as those who need to be taught. For the next six Sundays we are going to hear about a classroom with those who sat at Jesus' feet listening to what commentator, Douglas Hare calls Jesus' Inaugural Address, more commonly known as The Sermon on the Mount, found in chapters 5–7 of Matthew.

Jesus was very serious about teaching the disciples what he meant by the Kingdom of Heaven. This is one of those terms which has caused confusion for some people. When we think of heaven we may automatically identify it as something that will be in the future, for some it may be a place. But, when Matthew has Jesus using the term here, he follows the Jewish tradition of revering the One whom we worship. It was a sign of reverence to use words other than God to refer to the Holy One. Other gospel writers use the phrase The Kingdom of God, but Matthew does not. Matthew's congregation, to whom this gospel was addressed, were mostly Jewish Christians and this would be an important detail to them.

So Jesus said he would teach them how to fish for people. Now I know that there are those who do not find the phrase, *fish for people*, very appealing. For awhile I toyed with a sermon title, *Caught - by Jesus*, but it conjured an image of people with fish hooks in their lips, or flopping about in a huge net. Again, to these fishermen in this lesson, and presumably to those in Matthew's congregation, this phrase would make sense. The point is that Jesus knew it would take others to help him get the message out and then teach those who responded. It's a great example of "Pay it Forward" – I help you and then you help someone else.

Just for fun, here is a third thing to take away today. Ponder the question of your level of interest or eagerness to learn the teachings of Jesus and to follow them. I was fascinated this week as I watched Jon Stewart on *The Daily Show*, interviewing Neil deGrasse Tyson, director of the Hayden Planetarium and host of PBS *NOVA Science Now*, which is a great show on Wednesday night. What I loved about the interview is the excitement and zeal of Tyson for exploration and discovery. His quote from Albert Einstein, "Imagination is more important than knowledge" is applicable here. Can you imagine a world – maybe not the world – a community which lives by the teachings of Jesus?

People who have heard the call to follow and have placed themselves in the classroom, learning and then practicing what they learned in the community – I can imagine that. Jesus gave himself to a ministry of describing and demonstrating the Kingdom of Heaven. His words allow us to imagine, and then reach for it. He inspires us to let go of our small self-controlled world and strive toward this better way. He is the great teacher, the light that shines on us. Amen

ASSIGNMENT:

1. **Recall** the circumstances when you responded to Jesus' invitation to "Follow Me".
2. **Acknowledge** the level of your interest in learning and living.
3. **Review** how much of yourself and your time you have given to the classroom with Jesus.