

THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY
“Servants For the Future”
Florida-Georgia District Church Worker Recruitment Sunday
THOUGHTS AND NOTES for preaching on Matthew 4:12-25

“Follow Me” seems to be an easy choice as a sermon theme for this special day set aside for church worker recruitment. The Gospel lesson includes the dramatic call of Jesus in v. 19, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.” I have no intention to dictate a sermon for you, but I thought I would share some thought I have had on this text.

If you are part of the three-point school, you may want to think in terms of “goal, malady, and means.”

The **Goal** would be that the people of God may see that God calls people unto himself. Some of these people are additionally called for full-time service, as the disciples were. Is God Calling you?

The **Malady** is that we believe that we are not good enough, talented enough, or skilled enough to serve him. We allow earthly standards to cloud our vision. We don’t want to hear the call, or we fail to believe that God would want me.

The **Means** is Jesus Christ. The cry, “Repent! For the reign of heaven stands near,” is as valid and powerful today as it was over 2000 years ago. The same Savior who called us to be His sons and daughters in baptism continues to call us to live that new life with all fullness and joy.

I pray that what follows will be helpful to you as you develop your message. A very helpful resource for me has been Matthew 1:1 – 11:1 in the Concordia Commentary Series by Jeffrey A. Gibbs.

- Matthew 4:17 marks a beginning and a summary of Jesus’ preaching – note that it is identical to the message of John the Baptizer, “Repent! For the reign of heaven stands near.” John’s role was to preach that message to prepare the Lord’s way. Jesus proclaims those words as the Lord himself who has come to liberate his people from their sin and to announce the presence of God himself.
 - Jesus is addressing the spiritual condition of lostness – the call to repent is a call to conversion, to move from sin and unbelief to repentant faith and salvation
 - The “reign of heaven” is not primarily a place; it is the reigning of God in history. Note the already but not yet dynamic – the reign of heaven has not yet fully arrived in full power, but Jesus, the Son of God, is already here bringing the salvation that will fully apply at the end of days.

- In light of the nearness of God’s reign, Jesus calls his first disciples. Note the overwhelming authority of Jesus’ call: in 4:18, the disciples were going about their routine activities. In 4:19, Jesus calls them to follow Him. In 4:20 they immediately leave their nets and follow.
 - No one becomes a disciple of Jesus on his or her own initiative.
 - Jesus calls, and only then can human beings respond
 - Very different from how 1st century rabbis recruited their followers. Rabbis waited for individuals to seek out the rabbi; Jesus calls his followers to trust and serve him.
- To what are the disciples responding? What do they already know and believe?
 - They believe that His preaching is true.
 - They have begun to acknowledge their need for conversion, their need to be saved, and that God in Christ has broken into history.
 - In other words, they have begun to repent and believe
- **On the one hand**, it is easy to make too much or too little of the fact that the fishermen left their former lives to follow Jesus. As the Gospel of Matthew unfolds, it is clear that at this point they did not fully understand fully who Jesus was or to what they were committing. That would only come later with the gift of the Holy Spirit. At this point they still had their houses and mothers-in-law, mothers, and presumably other relationships. **On the other hand**, as Jesus began to preach and call disciples to Himself, these disciples are given the beginning of an understanding. The circumstances that define the beginning of discipleship with Jesus, and that will go on characterizing that relationship is the authority and primacy of the call to follow him. Jesus came into a sinful world to save sinners. Individual women and men are claimed and called by Jesus, and acknowledge his calling by following him.

What does this “calling” refer to? Who do the fishermen represent? In his commentary, Jeffrey Gibbs argues that in Matthew’s narration of 4:18-22, the four fishermen possess both a generic “believer” quality as well as a more narrowly focused “apostle” quality.

The call to the four fishermen seen as uniquely focused on them as apostles:

- The four fishermen have a unique quality in that they will become members of the group of Jesus’ apostles – as apostles their call is distinct from Jesus’ call to every disciple.
- Some of Jesus’ disciples are “sent” in the narrow sense of the word – some Christians steady the boat, some repair nets, and others will actually cast the nets and gather the precious catch of human lives for Christ.
- The fishermen literally begin to follow Jesus around as a group who will virtually be with Jesus for his entire ministry on earth.

- Gibbs argues, Matthew here in 4:18-22 wants his readers to regard the fishermen not merely as Christians, but as those Christians who will become apostles. The promise that the fishermen will become fishers of men, then connects to the teaching office of the apostles through which the one holy catholic and apostolic church will reach out to draw other to Christ, who calls all people to be his own.” Matthew 1:1 – 11:1 in the Concordia Commentary Series by Jeffrey A. Gibbs, CPH: St. Louis, 2006.

Some additional thoughts for your consideration:

- Some commentators argue that the New Testament can be read in such a way that Jesus had prior contact with these four fishermen. He did not simply appear out of the blue and demand that they drop everything and follow him. They might have made arrangements in anticipation of this day. Perhaps they were acting in the joyful sense that they were being presented an incredible opportunity far beyond their wildest imagining. Like other cheerful givers who have experienced the love of God, they acted out of joy for the door being opened for them.
- It is very human to doubt that we can do anything to serve God’s Kingdom in a specific way. It is very natural to doubt that God can use a sinner like me to accomplish His ends. Who am I to pray in public? Who am I to teach? Who am I to witness? Many people believe they cannot. This Gospel lesson is one of many that show us how God can! God took a fugitive like Moses, a young man like Jeremiah, a stubborn man like Jonah, and ordinary people like these fishermen and used them to accomplish His mission. If God could do that with those, is he not powerful enough to taker whatever talents we have and use them too? If God can make fishermen into apostles, he can take us and make us into pastors and teachers, Directors of Christian Education, Outreach, Family Life, and Parish Music. God can take you and use you as a Deaconess or a Lay Minister!
- It is important to note that the disciples still had human failings. They would fight among themselves, fail to understand the teachings of Jesus, and would abandon him at his crucifixion. Christians throughout all ages have failed in numerous ways. Over and over again, they would have to repent – to discover once again their helplessness. Over and over again they would have to be found in their lost condition by their Savior. Over and over again they would have to rediscover with joy the reality that the “reign of heaven stands near!” Over and over again, they would hear the call and the promise, “Follow me!”

May God richly bless you in your service.

Rev. Wayne Wilke, Ph.D.
Executive Director
Concordia House of Studies