

SERMON—Matthew 4—12-2

Third Sunday after Epiphany—January the 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2023 at Emmanuel Lutheran Church

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.*

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus comes calling people to repent and appoints His first disciples, making them fishers of people. This is one of our familiar stories in the church. Through this story—fishing has become a metaphor for the task we're called to do as people of God.

Even if you've never fished, you can understand the image. Basically, Jesus is saying if you follow Him, you're going to work at catching people—which means, leading others to His Kingdom.

I want you to just think a minute about the last time you shared your faith with someone who wasn't a believer—with someone who had nothing to do with any church.

It's probably safe to say that most of us don't have this experience on a regular basis. Not only are we afraid of offending people, because heaven's knows, we've been offended by certain evangelistic styles ourselves, we also have an almost inborn sense of religion being a "private matter."

It is something we're supposed to keep to ourselves. We treat it as though it's a subject not discussed in polite circles. We classify it, along with certain other subjects, as being too personal to be a proper subject for conversation.

This attitude we have about religion has never been a teaching of the Gospel. Our feelings about this have come more from our culture than they have from our faith. One of the biggest challenges facing mainline churches today is to be able to make a move from a sense of worship being private, to worship being public.

Let me explain a little of what I mean by that. One of the questions we always face as people who are called to fish for Christ is – "How do we help make disciples?" AND out of that question comes – "How is it we make people feel more at home who come to worship here?" How do we welcome strangers into our worship life?

If by "feel at home" we mean, help them to feel more at ease in OUR home, OUR church, we'll be asking them to come into our private world. And we'll apply the same rules here as we do to strangers who come into our private family homes.

BUT—what if we shift the emphasis from private to public, and believe that helping people feel more at home means "helping them to feel more comfortable in the home of Christ?" If that's the case—that this is the home of Christ—then we're ALL invited guests. Our task ISN'T to welcome people in our private world, but share publicly the hospitality of Christ.

When we welcome people to this public place of worship where we're all the invited guests of Christ, then the demands are made on us to make the welcome as hospitable as possible, because in the welcome we're inviting them to make the Gospel story their own. This tends to turn us outward.

This is probably one of the most important lessons the mainline church can learn, because it might well mean the difference between life and death. We may not be able to stand on the street corners and buttonhole people into listening to us—that's not normally the style of someone who's attracted to the mainline church.

But—we can offer a genuine invitation to worship to people we meet, and we can make certain that when people come here for the first time, they'll find a building, a worship service and a people that says “welcome, this is the place to which you've been called. Here, together with us, you will experience the power and presence of Christ.

Have you every had the experience of driving in the country late at night, maybe on some unfamiliar back road that is lined with trees and darkness so deep surrounding you that it feels as though it is overpowering you? That can be very disconcerting; especially if you're not sure of the area or the direction you are headed. The darkness can seem like some vast, unfriendly void that goes on forever.

But, finally in the darkness ahead, you see a point of light coming from the window of a house, and you're no longer alone. There are other people in the world, and knowing that, changes the darkness around you. It's no longer everything; it's just something you have to go through to get to the light.

What is it that gives people hope?

What if the light that can get them through the darkness when it seems like the darkness will never end?

Would it surprise you to hear that YOU are the light?

That any welcome you give another human being in the name of Christ may well be the light that gets them through what might otherwise destroy them.

We don't generate the light on our own because it's the light of Christ. Btu that light's to be so much a part of us that we're capable of taking it with us wherever we go.

Christ provides the power, and we—well we try not to do things that'll overshadow the light. In everything we do and say—we try to let that light shine within us, through us, and around us.

When we were young, we probably heard the song that went like this:

*This little light of mine—I'm going to let it shine...*

If we as God's people find it difficult to preach on street corners, then our call may well be to let our light shine in a totally different way, because not everyone is going to stop and listen to those street preachers. There will be those who will hear the call through our quiet invitations and Christian hospitality.

That's why our hospitality is so important. It's not a matter of being friendly, in this day and age: it is becoming more and more apparent that this is the way we Lutherans do our witnessing. Because our culture has changed, hospitality is no longer an issue of doing only what is comfortable and convenient for us, and people can take it or leave it.

Hospitality has become an issue that's central to our faithfulness to Christ!

How we welcome people when they come to this place for worship, will probably be what determines if they will stick around long enough to make the Gospel story their own. In the past, when people came to worship for the first time, they usually had some exposure already to Christian worship.

That's no longer true.

More and more visitors now enter worship as people who have never been affiliated with the church and know nothing about it. They don't bring with them a knowledge of some familiar hymn—they don't even know the Lord's Prayer.

They enter the church as though they're entering alien territory, they feel the church might have something to offer, but they're ready to turn around and run the other way, if the way we worship makes them feel inadequate or unable to participate.

The single biggest threat for people coming to church for the first time is the fear of feeling shame—of not being good enough, not knowing the right words, not knowing how to act, not being part of the “in-crowd.”

That's why hospitality has become an issue of faith. For mainline churches, it becomes the way we witness; the way we evangelize, the way we fish. Instead of kicking ourselves for not being able to go to the street corners, let's find ways we can do well what we already know how to do, and this is, offer hospitality in the name of Jesus Christ.

In all honesty, it's not as easy as it sounds, because it means we must be willing to look at how we do some things and be open to changing some things—

YES, sisters and brothers it is going to require something of each one of us. There's no way we can be faithful witnesses for Christ and stay exactly as we are.

The light that began to shine in the manger is bringing about a new day. New days mean new hopes and opportunities for new ways of being. The darkness is fading, and we don't have to fear it anymore.

The call of Jesus to follow Him is a word of grace and great demand. It promises everything and it demands everything. But only through such a word as this, can the darkness of our condition be confronted and overcome by the Light of Christ.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.