

Sermon on 4 Epiphany A, Matthew 4:12-23

Preached at Custer Lutheran Fellowship on 1-27-2008 by Pastor David Van Kley

### **Follow Me and I Will Make You BE for People**

Deciding to add another nurse to the staff, Custer Regional Hospital places an advertisement in the **Chronicle** and elsewhere, inviting applicants to submit a resume'. Two apply: one is an RN, with fifteen years' experience on the pediatrics ward at McKinnon Hospital in Sioux Falls. Her references praise her work! The other dropped out of high school as a junior, never worked as a nurse, and is squeamish at the sight of blood. But he did stay at a Holiday Inn Express last night!

Who will get the job? Obviously: the **first!** To land a responsible job, you must prove that you are **qualified** for it!

Today's gospel lesson is one of the great texts of the New Testament. I imagine the air smelled of seaweed and fish as Jesus walked the shores of the Sea of Galilee. It was a busy place, apparently. First, Jesus sees two fishermen, Peter and Andrew, knee deep in the water, casting their nets. He can tell they are poor because they are working without a boat. "Come, follow me." Jesus says. Immediately, they drop everything and follow. A little further, Jesus sees another set of brothers, James and John, sitting with their Dad in the family fishing boat, mending nets. Again, he says, "Come, follow me." Again, immediately, they follow.

Note: Jesus does not advertise in the **Capernaum Chronicle**. He does not invite applicants to submit a resume'. There are no interviews, no background checks. But when Jesus says, "Come, follow me," they do.

In his series of videos on the Christian faith, Rob Bell describes the process for becoming the disciple of a Rabbi in the first century. First, you had to memorize the entire Torah—the first five books of our Bible—word for word. If you couldn't handle that, you were sent home to learn the family business. If you were judged good enough to continue, you memorized and learned to interpret all the rabbinical commentaries on the Torah—way more material than the Torah itself! Then, students were weeded out again. Only a few—those Bell calls "the best of the best of the best"—could become disciples of a Rabbi. The Rabbi would interview you, decide if you were smart enough, and then invite you to follow him.

What were Peter and Andrew, James and John doing? They were engaged in the family business! Which means they **weren't** among the best of the best of the best! If they went to discipleship school at all, they flunked out and returned to Galilee—sort of the Rez of the Holy Land—to begin **fishing**, an occupation low on the social scale. They had smelly clothes, calloused hands, and lots of dirt under the fingernails. They weren't qualified to be Jesus' disciples. But Jesus said, "Come, follow me."

Our expectations are turned on end. **Our** expectations for ourselves. Down deep,

we are nagged by a certain amount of self-doubt. We fear that we are not up to snuff. Not qualified. Not good enough. We realize that we are ignorant in many ways. Only too aware of our imperfections and sins, we seek to cover them up. Whatever image we may project, we often do not **feel** adequate. Jesus doesn't seem to care. He says to us as to the first disciples: "Come, follow me."

He says this to **all** people. That's the point of picking fishermen from Galilee to follow him. The kingdom of grace is for **all**. For women and men. Poor and wealthy. Straight and gay. Democrat and Republican. People with Down's Syndrome and Nobel Prize winners. Afghans and Americans. Inmates and the innocent. **No one** is excluded. "Come, follow me," Jesus says. We'd be crazy not to take the invitation.

And what then? To his first disciples, Jesus said: "I will make you **fish for people**." Their solitary occupation of fishing would be replaced by a public one. The rhythm of catching, sorting, weighing, and cleaning fish would be replaced by the rhythm of listening to God, touching people with healing hands and feeding them multiplied loaves. Discipleship called them to change their lifestyle. Radically so.

When I first started reading the lessons in church, I was a "basket case." I'd stand up in front of people, my heart beating like a drum at a rock concert, my voice wavering like a western yodeler. Several times, I barely made it through without hyperventilating. I'd tell myself, "I'll **never** do **that** again. But I did. And now I stand before people all the time. Discipleship called me to change my lifestyle.

I mentioned this once in a sermon and challenged people to allow themselves to be stretched by God. Afterward, a woman said, "I didn't like that sermon." "Why?" I asked, startled by her honesty. "Because I'm **not** going to read the lessons," Joyce said. "I'd **die** if I read the lessons! It's not my gift. I'm not cut out for it."

What do you think? Was Joyce right or wrong?

In a way, she was wrong. Disciples are not called to be comfortable, but to be stretched by God. But in another way, I think Joyce was right. When Jesus said, "I will make you **fish** for people" to **fishermen**, could he have meant that they would continue to be who they **were**—fishermen—even as they began the work of discipleship? That instead of just using their skills to make a living, they now would use them for people? Maybe Jesus was saying, "I will take the raw materials of your lives and use them for the sake of the gospel, to include all people in the kingdom of God."

What if they happened to be shepherds, rather than fishermen? Would Jesus have said, "I will make you **tend** people?" And if they were musicians? "I will make you create harmony among people?" And if they were foresters? "I will make you grow people?" Or maybe, "I will make you grow **trees** for the wellbeing of people?" And sometimes, "I will make you **protect** trees from the selfish desires of people?"

Do you see? We who are called by Christ are called to use the expertise and experience we have! We are called to do the things we love to do, the things we do well. God will indeed stretch us in the process! But the main thing is that we are called to use our gifts and talents for a new **purpose**. To bring God's love and forgiveness, healing and justice into a deeply hurting and hurtful world.

Many in our congregation used their talents in the building trades last summer to make the Habitat House possible for the Frybarger family. Now, some are using those same talents to remodel a house for the Hart family. Next summer, those talents will be needed to build another Habitat house in Custer. Jesus says to builders, "Follow me and I will make you build for people."

I've always loved the Auction of Talents! What a wonderful idea: doing what you love to do—what you're good at—to raise money for people in need. This year, the Benson girls made necklaces and sold them. Their mom, Traci, used her skills as a seamstress to make blankets. Dave Hansen carved some bears. Wanda Dahlstrom sold one of her Puerto Rican dinners and the Hudson's several of their Cajun Turkey dinners—who else but Wanda and the Hudson's could do such a thing? Allen Webster used his talent as an auctioneer for the sake of the kingdom. "Follow me and I will make you talk really, really fast for people," Jesus says.

People are like rubber bands in the hands of God. Limp and useless by itself, a rubber band can be stretched by strong hands and put to good use. Of course, a rubber band can stretch only so far before breaking. Maybe Joyce never **could** read the lessons. Maybe I never could be an opera singer. **Probably** I never could be an opera singer! But I **can** do what I can do. And **you** can do what you can do.

Maybe that's what we need to hear this day. Jesus calls us, whoever we are and whatever we're doing. "Come, follow me," he says. "No experience needed; no degrees required. Just you, yourselves. I will make you **BE** for people." Amen.