

Third Sunday after the Epiphany + January 22, 2017
Atonement Lutheran Church
Matthew 4:12-23

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Who do you follow?

Perhaps a sports team: the Green Bay Packers, the Dallas Cowboys, the Milwaukee Bucks, or the Chicago Cubs—a better bet now than the Milwaukee Brewers.

What about on social media? On Instagram I follow Frankie and Chance Rodgers, Aaron Rodgers' rescue dogs. And also Evan Siegle, the Packers' amazing team photographer. And I follow my kids, of course.

There's the news: Perhaps you follow CNN, or whatever your news outlet of choice happens to be. Just make sure you don't get all your news from Facebook.

All these kinds of following simply mean that you "keep up" with them. Or, perhaps you follow a vegan diet. This is following in the sense of paying attention to something in a way that governs aspects of your behavior, in this case regarding food. You could also say that you follow a healthy lifestyle, or that you follow the Golden Rule – do unto others as you would have them do unto you, although we usually think of that only in certain situations when we might be tempted to do the opposite.

In our Gospel reading Jesus issues a call to Simon and Andrew as they are going about their business of being fishermen. They are in the midst of casting a net into the sea. Jesus chooses this moment to address them, without any introduction: "Follow me," Jesus says, "and I will make you fishers of people." I prefer the translation "fishers of people" instead of "fish for people" because it focuses on the vocation, the calling, rather than simply on the action.

Jesus is giving Simon, who's now going to be called Peter, and Andrew a new vocation—a new calling.

The word “vocation” comes out of the Latin root word *vocare*, meaning “to call.” But most people think of the word “vocation” as being the same as “career.” On Feb. 3 Beloit Turner Middle School is having a Career Day, and they'll probably be talking all about jobs and encouraging each student to think about what kind of job they'd like to have when they're ready to begin earning a living. “I want to be....” (fill in the blank). But the truth is, kids, even if you get to be an airline pilot, or an astronaut, or an auto mechanic, or a baseball player—going down the list alphabetically—that isn't really who you are. For most people, work is just work. It's not that their work isn't satisfying. To be sure, there are moments of meaning and purpose. But often people find little sense of connection in the job itself to who they really believe themselves to be. What most people end up wanting is for the work week to be over so they can get home and finally be themselves. Isn't that where “TGIF” comes from? (Thank *goodness* it's Friday)

But we all must work. So, where do many people find their greatest sense of fulfillment, meaning, and purpose? You thought I might say “in church.” No -- in *relationships*. Even those people who do find meaning and fulfillment at work often point to relationships *at work* as the places of particular significance. It's the same at school: If you love school, it's probably because you have good friends there and get along well with your teachers. You enjoy being with those people.

This is why Jesus tells Peter and Andrew to “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of *people*.” He is not giving them a new career – not as “disciples” or “witnesses of the truth” or “messengers of the kingdom” or even “the first Christians.” Rather, they are going to be *fishers of people*. Jesus is calling them not into work but into relationships.

I think this is the greatest challenge to our modern understanding of vocation. Too often, we stress the *arenas* in which we exercise our vocation, such as government, family, and church, or the *roles* we play as employees, employers, parents, students, citizens and volunteers—instead of emphasizing the concrete relationships in which we are involved and the actual persons with whom we are in relationship.

Martin Luther and the other 16th century reformers understood that all these roles we play, all the stations in life to which people are called, are provided by God in order to care for our neighbors, for the people around us, and especially those who are in any kind of need. This gives us a realistic and life-giving way to understand the vocation of following Jesus. We probably can't identify with what Peter and Andrew did, dropping everything in a split second to follow Jesus the moment the call comes. "Immediately they left their nets and followed him," Matthew tells us. The same with James and John. Just picture James and John's father Zebedee—he was left sitting in the boat all by himself! Most of us aren't able to respond to Jesus' call with such immediacy and total abandonment of worldly possessions, because we have responsibilities to our family and community.

What it does mean that Jesus is calling us to be fishers of people is that we are called to devote ourselves to being *in relationship*—with him, with each other, with all the various people we will meet in our lives. He is calling us to be in relationship with him and all these people the same way he is in relationship with us: By loving us unconditionally and with no strings attached; by always forgiving us no matter what we have done or how much we have messed up; by caring for us in the midst of all life's circumstances and always being there for us, even when we feel abandoned by others; by listening without judging us; by accepting us just as we are; and by constantly reminding us of the power of hope and the shower of God's abundant grace, which we

never deserve but which always keeps pouring down on us anyway so that our cup is always overflowing.

The vocation of following Christ might take us to distant lands, or it could take shape right here at home just a few blocks from where we grew up. But it will always involve people. So, following Jesus Christ is not a ministry, or a movement, or a label such as WWJD, but *involvement* with real flesh-and-blood people. This is how we are called to be *fishers* of people.

And how do we know if, in fellowship with other human beings we are genuine followers of Christ? Because we walk in the light, as 1 John Chapter 1 tells us, in words that form the basis for our opening hymn today:

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. ⁶If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; ⁷but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another.

With this in mind, I invite you to call to mind one particular person with whom you have a relationship. Perhaps it's a relationship that evokes joy, or sorrow, or frustration, or hope. Take a few moments and pray for that person with whatever thoughts or words come into your head. See if you can discern in the midst of that how God is calling you to make a difference in the life of that person. In doing this, my prayer for you is that you will discover that God has *already* called you to be a fisher of people. May the Holy Spirit continue to strengthen you in your sacred vocation.

AMEN.