

Pentecost 7A + July 23, 2017
Romans 8:12-25; Mark 1:16-20
Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit, WI
Nancy Raabe, Pastor

“What would Jesus do?” We all know this phrase. What you might not know is that it was the title of a popular novel published in the 1890s. A century later a church in Michigan picked up the phrase and spread it among Christian youth, and it quickly caught fire. For awhile WWJD bracelets and bumper stickers were everywhere.

We don’t see much of those anymore, but the concept of following Jesus, in the sense of holding up Jesus as an example for how we should live, is still ingrained in modern culture. This is how our gospel lesson from Mark today *could* be read. “Follow me,” Jesus says. “OK,” we respond, just as the first disciples did. “Just show us what to do, and we’ll do it.”

But there’s something problematic in this, because it implies we are somehow lacking. We are not like Jesus, this thinking goes, and to become more like him, we have to behave as we imagine he would in life’s various situations. This actually creates a wall of separation—Jesus over there, perfect and without sin, and us here, flawed and mired in sin. We can try to be like Jesus but we’ll always fail. This understanding also makes faith into a work: The harder you try, the more you’ll be more like Jesus. This goes against scripture, which tells us that nothing we do can earn us God’s favor. We already have it.

In the same sense, we already follow Jesus. Christ, the Incarnate Word, already dwells within us. As Paul says in our reading today from Romans, we have already received the spirit of adoption—that is, we *are* God’s children. We already belong to God, and may use the same term of endearment that Jesus did --“Abba!” “Daddy!” “Mommy!” “Grandma!” – for the one who loves us unconditionally. It’s like our creed: It’s not “I would like to believe...,” but “I believe.”

Of course, already belonging to God doesn't mean that we're all set for eternity. In this life we must endure grief and all kinds of pain. We struggle with our aging bodies. Our earthly fortunes are dependent on worldwide economic currents in the midst of which we are powerless. But Jesus dwelling in our hearts means that we share, with him, our worries and woes. We meet him at the foot of the cross, where we find a glorious exchange: He takes our suffering upon himself, and we experience his agony as our own. Through this communion with Christ, which is strengthened every time we receive the Lord's Supper, we find the endurance that we need to meet whatever comes our way.

But what does Jesus mean in today's Gospel reading when he says to the disciples: "Follow me and I will make you *fishers of people*"?

I believe Jesus is calling us to attentiveness, beginning with attentiveness to Christ himself within us. I have found it to be true in any situation of stress that, when I step back and focus on Jesus at the center of my heart, the stress evaporates. The challenge of the spiritual life is cultivating that focus for more than a few passing seconds.

Out of the attentiveness to Christ comes a greater awareness of the needs of those around us and of the needs of the world because we are seeing through Jesus' eyes. We are able to listen to people's stories with greater empathy—we feel their situations and respond in love. We become more attuned to various forms of systemic oppression in our culture, such as the American prison system, which has evolved into a legally sanctioned way of excluding a large percentage of minorities and especially blacks from the mainstream of American society. Under the full cover of law, a pattern of disenfranchisement has taken the place of just as slavery and Jim Crow laws of the former era. For example, blacks are incarcerated for drug offenses at a rate 10 times that of whites. Minor drug convictions bring them sentences of at least 10 years. At every

stage — traffic stops, arrests, prosecutions, convictions, sentences — racial discrimination is the rule rather than the exception. And it's all perfectly legal.

In cultivating an attentiveness to Christ within us, we become more attuned to larger issues such as this that affect our fellow human beings. We also are better equipped to identify what is truth and what is falsehood. And we bring all this into prayer as we ask God to show us how we may respond to the world's needs.

This is what Jesus means by telling Simon, Andrew, James, and John that they will become fishers of people. "Know me at the center of your being," Jesus says, "and out of that I will show you how to put your gifts to use for God's kingdom."

This will take a different form for each of us. Here in Mark he is addressing four fishermen using imagery they can grasp. By becoming fishers of people, they will be spreading the gospel and drawing in others to share their faith. If you are a **teacher**, God will use you to show children that they are all loved and valued. If you are a **nurse**, God will use you to comfort suffering and fearful people and give them hope. If you are a video game developer, God will use you to create lively and interesting games that communicate the values we find in the Bible. If you are an accountant or an economist, God will use you to reveal the great disparities of wealth in the world.

In being attentive to Christ, we find our particular mission as proclaimers of the gospel. What is the mission of Atonement Lutheran Church? What are the gifts we can bring to our community? What vision do you have for us? I invite you to share those with me and with each other, in the days, weeks, and months to come. In those, I pray, we will find our future.

Amen.