

Third Sunday After Epiphany

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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I hate sitting next to a stranger on an airplane. I don't mind talking to people, but most of the time after exchanging pleasantries the other person will ask, "what do you do?" I hate that question, especially trapped at 36,000 feet. Often, I have to either listen to their confession about why they don't go to church, or I have to explain that I'm not one of *those* pastors. Americans seem to jump right to that question – "what do you do?" Yet, what we "do" does not completely define us, it's simply one piece of our identity.

Last week the Gospel of Mark focused on Jesus's identity, and today's episode continues with that theme. At the beginning of today's reading, we heard that John the baptizer was imprisoned. This isn't a throw-away transitional phrase, but rather, it is an important revelation. John the baptizer preached in the wilderness and the *people went to him*. Yet, *Jesus came to the people*, where they were, in the midst of their day-to-day work.<sup>1</sup> So, instead of the people needing to go to the temple in Jerusalem to experience God's presence, rather than needing to go to the synagogue to see a religious leader, and in contrast to the prophet John who waited until people came to the wilderness, Jesus, the Son of God, the Messiah, this radically political and religiously subversive teacher, *Jesus went to the people*.

As we saw Jesus's identity unfold, he began rounding up disciples. Jesus saw Simon and Andrew and he said, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." However, that translation missed the nuance in the Greek. A better translation is: "Follow me, and I will turn you into

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<sup>1</sup> <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/>

fishers.”<sup>2</sup> Do you see the difference? “I will make you fish” is task-oriented, and “I will turn you into fishers” is identity-focused.<sup>3</sup> “I will make you fish” is an action, while “I will turn you into fishers” is an on-going development. “Make you fish” is doing, and “turn you into fishers” is becoming. One is a project, and the other is a process. (I’m going to let that sink in.) Why does this matter? Well, this difference helps us understand the identity of the disciples. In Mark’s gospel, we are encouraged to see ourselves as a disciple. So, how we understand the role of the disciples helps us better understand our role as Christians.

I think, this is where Christianity took the less-biblical, easy road. For decades pastors and worshipers believed that Christianity was “being.” That is, if you went to church and gave an offering, you got your Christian credentials. Church leaders *only* judged congregational effectiveness by butts in pews and bills in the plate. But we were wrong. You see, Christianity is not task-oriented. It isn’t about being, it’s not doing something, and it’s not even an action. To follow Christ, means to imitate God’s character. In Mark, that means becoming a servant; it means learning to live without violence and pride; and it is an on-going pursuit of prioritizing love and relationship above all else. Is that making sense?

A few examples might help. You tell me if this is an example of “make you fish” or “turn you into fishers” – “make” or “turn into.”

1. Bringing food for fellowship hour after church (make) – this is an action where I do.
2. Learning how to better serve others by hosting fellowship hour (turn into) – this has an action and developmental reflection resulting in transformation.
3. Giving a meal to someone who is hungry (make).

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<sup>2</sup> New English Translation.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, Ted A. “Third Sunday after the Epiphany: Mark 1:14-20, Homiletical Perspective.” Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Feasting on the Word.” Year B, Vol. 1. Pg 284-289.

4. Sharing a meal together with someone who is hungry (turn into).

You see, being a disciple is not about checking something off your to-do list. Instead, it's about becoming a life-long learner. Being a disciple means not only learning from the stories of our faith but also putting it into practice with the faithful. Being a disciple is about studying, observing, and noting the reality of the world and putting that in conversation with our faith.

Far too often, our faith is behind us developmentally. While we work to better ourselves in our finances, career, and relationships, our faith is stagnant. We prioritize our therapist, we absorb social media, we drink the daily news, and we drown in our careers, but do we give the same attention to the scriptures or actively searching for God's presence? Do we take time for Christian meditation, known as prayer? Do we let the Bible inform our political views instead of the other way around? I wonder, are we following Jesus or trying to convince Jesus to follow us?

Friends, all is not lost. The disciples in Mark's gospel are our examples. There, we see these 20-something year old disciples astounded by Jesus's teachings, they witness the healing of the sick, and they lose Jesus and seek him again. You see, the good news is that our God that isn't going to wait for us. Our God knows that left to our own devices we'd be stuck mending our nets in the day-to-day and forget the big picture. That is why God takes on human form. Our God is present at this table of welcome, our God is known at the font of empowerment, our God is revealed in the scriptures of wisdom, and God is glimpsed in this transforming group of people. These are the gifts of God. We come to learn and to be challenged. Then, we are sent, to emulate Jesus's actions; sent to become God's partner in this reign of love; sent to become Christ's disciple. Amen.