

# Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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There is a heaviness in the air these days. Protests across the country. Federal agents murdering U.S. citizens. You don't need to follow the news closely to feel it. You can hear it in the way people talk to one another. And you can feel it in the exhaustion so many people are carrying — especially those who already know what it means to be watched, questioned, targeted, or told they don't belong.

The Bible has a word for moments like this, and we heard it in today's reading from Isaiah. It calls them *darkness*. It's not a commentary on skin color, and it is not simply the absence of goodness. Darkness is the presence of fear, violence, exclusion, and injustice that press in on people day after day. It's the situation where we become tangled in systems and habits that diminish life.

And Matthew's Gospel tells us that Jesus begins his public ministry right in the middle of that kind of moment. Matthew said, "When Jesus heard that John [the Baptist] had been arrested..." — that's how his ministry started. Not with a celebration. Not with a miracle. With an arrest.

John's arrest is a sign that telling the truth has consequences. It's a reminder that speaking about repentance, justice, and God's reign puts you in conflict with power. And it's only after hearing that news — only after something breaks — that Jesus steps fully into what he is called to do. Sometimes that's

how it works for us, too — not because God causes harm, but because disruption and suffering wake us up to what faithfulness looks like.

And what Jesus did next matters. He didn't retreat. He didn't wait for safer conditions. He went to Galilee — to a place shaped by empire, occupation, cultural mixing, and a long memory of oppression. Matthew calls it "Galilee of the Gentiles." That place is a crossroads — a place where people have learned how to live with uncertainty and power pressing in from all sides. It is there — not in a protected religious center — that Jesus began to preach.

What did he preach? He said, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." That is also what John the Baptist preached, and it can sound familiar enough that we miss how radical it is. Jesus is not preaching shame. Rather, he's saying that God is already on the move. God's reign is close enough to touch, close enough to disrupt, close enough to change how people live together. And only then does Jesus invite anyone to follow him.

Then, he sees Simon and Andrew. He sees James and John. Fishermen. People making a living inside an imperial economy that they did not create and cannot easily escape. And Jesus does not shame them for participating in it. He doesn't give them a lecture about complicity. He didn't ask them to fix the system before they come. He simply says, "Follow me." And then comes that strange phrase: "I will make you fish for people."

Now, I've heard churches use that phrase about fishing for people as a metaphor for recruiting people. But for the Biblical prophets, fishing language is about drawing things into the open — it's about disrupting injustice and loosening the grip of power that harms God's people. This is not a call to

collect souls or statistical numbers. It's a call to participate in God's work of restoring life. Which brings us to today — and to why this Sunday matters.

Reconciling in Christ Sunday isn't about a slogan or a logo. It's not about a designation or virtue signaling. It's about what happens when people who have spent much of their lives holding their breath finally get to exhale. It's about what happens when someone walks into a church — or watches online — and realizes they don't have to code switch or translate themselves, defend themselves, or hide parts of who they are in order to belong.

For, when we say we are Reconciling in Christ, we are saying — out loud and without condition — that God's love is not theoretical here. We are saying that LGBTQIA+ people — that is, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual people — are not problems to be solved, but beloved children of God. We are saying that Black, Indigenous, and People of Color are not an afterthought in the church, but essential voices in the body of Christ. We are saying that your whole self is affirmed, welcomed, and invited to fully participate in our community without pretense. And this matters more than we sometimes realize.

Because for many people, discovering a place like Wicker Park Lutheran Church feels like stepping into light after a long time in the dark. Some come having been told — directly or indirectly — that God could tolerate them but not delight in them. Others come exhausted from churches that asked them to leave parts of themselves at the door. Still others come unsure whether the church has room for their questions, their bodies, their stories.

But here, something shifts. People tell us they feel seen here — not scrutinized, not explained away, but genuinely known. They feel supported — not just welcomed on paper but accompanied in real life. They feel liberated — freed from the idea that faith requires shrinking themselves to fit into the dominate culture's expectations.

And, some people find that sense of belonging so rare that they hold onto it even when life takes them elsewhere. They move farther away and still, they worship with us online. Not because it's convenient — though worshipping in pajamas on a day like today doesn't hurt — but because communities of real welcome are harder to find than we might think. In fact, in the ELCA, fewer than one in eight congregations have made this kind of public, explicit commitment to full inclusion. You see, the sad reality is that places like this are not the norm. And that, tells us something important. It tells us that this work is not extra. It's not optional. It's not about being impressive or progressive. It's about following Jesus into the places where light is needed most — and trusting that when we do, lives are transformed.

And that's the pattern we saw in the Gospel today. Jesus heard about an arrest, and he stepped into a complicated place. He announced that God's reign has come near. And then he invited people — ordinary people, embedded in the world as it is — to participate in something new.

And, that invitation is still being extended to you and me and all of us today. Not as a demand. Not as a test. But as an opening. An opening into a community shaped by grace. An opening into justice that heals. An opening into a way of being church that reflects the wideness of God's love.

So today, on this RIC Sunday, we give thanks. We give thanks for the light that has already broken into the world's darkness. We give thanks for the lives, including our own, that have been changed by communities like ours. And we listen again for Jesus' voice today — still steady, still generous, still calling: "Come. Follow me." Amen.