

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Even if you don't use social media, I'd guess that you've probably heard someone say "follow us social media." For those who don't know, by following a person or an organization you can then see their pictures, watch their videos, or interact with their posts. The act of following in this regard is essentially opting-in to content that you can choose to passively peruse, enthusiastically engage with, or something in between. In this case, no matter how you engage with the content, you're considered a "follower."

Long before social media began, Jesus was also collecting followers. In today's gospel reading, we heard Jesus preaching and heard of his recruitment strategy with the disciples. But, to fully understand what is going on, we'll need to revisit the backstory and look at his deliverables.

So, backstory: We're in Matthew chapter 4 and the very first thing we read today was "Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested..." Which John are we talking about? John the Baptist. Remember, the guy wearing camel's hair clothing, eating locust, and insulting religious leaders. It's a perfect TikTok scene. So, THAT John was preaching, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Now, fast forward to today when Jesus was preaching, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Well, doesn't

that sound familiar? Did Jesus just steal John's sermon? He sure did! I suppose since John is in prison now, Jesus can probably use his language without any legal threat. / While the content of their sermons may be the same, Jesus recruited his followers differently. Instead of using John the Baptist's technique of living in wilderness and waiting for people to come to him, Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee and called out to two brothers to follow him and "fish for people." Eventually he called two other brothers, and they followed him too. This is where we need to pause for a minute.

Three things for us to explore: (1) the "phrase fish for people," (2) the term "follow," and (3) why this matters to those of us who don't fish.

#1 -- The "phrase fish for people." Who has ever heard today's gospel story before? Of those of you who have heard it before, who has heard a sermon that talks about how as followers of Jesus we need to be like the disciples and fish for people to either save them, bring them to the church, or something like that? It's a fun sermon with all sorts of fishing images and nothing remotely related to social media. Yet, scholars way more intelligent than I take pause at that well-meaning interpretation. One such New Testament scholar is Dr. Ched Myers. Dr. Myers notes that Jesus is not telling Simon Peter and Andrew that they are now missionaries. Rather, the image is carefully chosen from the book of Jeremiah, where it is used as a symbol of God's criticism of Israel. Elsewhere in the books of Amos and Ezra the concept of hooking fish" was a euphemism for judgement upon the

rich and the powerful.¹ You see, Jesus is telling these brothers to join in his struggle to overturn the existing order of power and privilege. The order that takes advantage of the poor, ignores the truth of God's gifts, and that believes in the fallacy of being self-made. Jesus invited those fishers to follow him and do that work.

That all brings us to the second point – “follow me.” This is another fun one too. What is translated as “follow me” here in English is more literally translated from the Greek as “come after” me. And the only time this phrase is used anywhere else in the Bible is in Matthew when Jesus says, “and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me” (Matthew 10:38). You see, what Jesus is NOT saying is to follow him and *observe* him healing people and preaching. It's not about taking pictures or recording video to add to your phone. Rather, Jesus is saying, follow me and do like me. So that when I am arrested, like John, then come after me and keep doing the same thing. Preach the message John preached. Preach the message of Moses and the prophets. Preach what is spoken to by the Psalmist and in the Five Scrolls. You see, throughout the Hebrew Scriptures we hear over and over again to do two things: (1) repent –that is turn toward what is good – and (2) see that the kingdom of heaven is near – that is notice that God's vision for a world filled with love, justice, and peace is so close that we can feel it, touch it, and live it.

¹ <https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/>

And all of that brings us to point #3 – why does all of that matter. First, in this space we are reminded of the full story of Matthew through our stained-glass windows. The story that includes John the Baptist and the calling of the disciples, but that isn't the end or the fullness of it all. You see, as we circle around the vault of the space starting with Jesus' birth and going throughout his life, we finally end at what is called "the window of eternal presence." This window recalls that "deliverable" I mentioned at the beginning. This window is from Matthew's final scene, sometimes called the Ascension where Jesus gives the Great Commission. And the Great Commission is Jesus's words to "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

You see, while that invitation to "follow" was given to those disciples, in the Great Commission we have been given that same invite. This call is not like a click of a button on social media that allows for passive watching or forgetting about it all together. Rather, Jesus is calling us to follow in his actions, the actions of John, and the actions of people of faith for thousands of years. We are called to do what got John in trouble, that is to speak truth to power. We are invited to respond like Jesus with forgiveness, love, and a commitment to service. We are beckoned to join in literally bringing about the kingdom of heaven that is here among us now.

And so, when we commit to bringing our church toward ADA accessibility, we follow Jesus. When we speak truth to power for the good of all, we follow Jesus. When we offer low-cost space for those struggling with addiction, those in need of food and housing, and those seeking a place where their full self can be loved, we follow Jesus. So too, when we support the work of adding a mental health center in our community, we follow Jesus. You see, in these actions and so much more, we take seriously Jesus' call to follow his lead.

So, there it is. Jesus calls you and me to "follow him and fish for people." To do the work that Jesus did to liberate the oppressed, to speak God's truth to power, and to serve without hesitation. Yet in that calling, Jesus is pointing us to the truth shown here in this window. The truth that God promises to be with us always. The truth that there are no ifs, ands, or buts about God's love. The truth that no matter how separated we feel from others, our selves, or the world, God is with us. So, when our relationships are on rocky ground, when our health puts up roadblocks, and when the troubles of life weigh us down. Jesus said, "Remember, I am with you always." Amen.