

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

January 26, 2020 (3rd Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A)
Matthew 4:12-25

A few years ago, there were some statistics floating around in church circles. If you take an average middle-aged church member who has attended church REGULARLY most of his/her life, by the age of fifty they would have listened to 1760 sermons, sung 5280 hymns, placed money in the offering plate about 1500 times, and NEVER introduced another person to Jesus Christ. It's true – most of us can't remember EVER talking to a non-believer about our faith. We just DON'T DO that sort of thing. We haven't DONE much fishing, as Jesus used the term.

The famous preacher Leonard Sweet says that's why many churches have gone, just in HIS LIFETIME, as HE puts it, "from mainline, to old-line, to sideline, to offline, to flat-line."

Most of us hear this story about the calling of the disciples, and as familiar as it is, we actually have MIXED feelings about it. We see the fishermen drop their nets, and leave their families and their boats behind, and we're AMAZED. We're INSPIRED by it. Such DEVOTION, such COMMITMENT. But THEN we think, "I could NEVER do that. I could never just leave everything BEHIND like that."

And so we kind of put the disciples up on a PEDESTAL, because they were SPECIAL, and God's CALL was just for THEM. But WE don't FEEL so called. WE'RE NOT special. We're just ORDINARY people, just regular folks, living our lives. God's call is just for the DISCIPLES, and missionaries, and church workers, and deacons and pastors. NOT for us. We think, "Jesus doesn't CALL ME, like he called THEM."

Some years ago, David Lose was on a research team studying vocation, and they discovered that most pastors and AIMs, who we now call Deacons, identified "vocation" and "calling" as important theological concepts, that were at the CENTER of their preaching and teaching, just as you would expect. But very FEW of their PARISHIONERS actually felt called. Most of them believed that what they did with their time DIDN'T MATTER to God, and to the church, and didn't make much DIFFERENCE in the world.

But we've GOTTEN this story ALL WRONG. Let me tell you something about those disciples. They were fishermen. In the RANKINGS of PROFESSIONS of Jesus day, fishermen were at the very BOTTOM, DOWN there with shepherds and tax collectors. They were common laborers. They were COMMON. Rabbis and their disciples were right up near the TOP. They were REVERED.

BOTH groups GOT where they were because of their EDUCATION. Every Jewish child of five or six went to school, and for the first 5 years they learned the Torah, which meant they MEMORIZED the first 5 books of the Bible. Now that's pretty impressive, but for MOST kids, that's where their education ended. Only the best of the best went on. At the next level, they memorized the ENTIRE Old Testament – Genesis to Malachai, MEMORIZED. Impressive, but most of THOSE kids washed out too, and went on to learn their family trades. Only the best of the best of the best could become DISCIPLES of their rabbi.

Rob Bell talks about this in one of his NOOMA videos

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(Put up Venn Diagram of Purpose)

I'm just gonna leave this up here for a while.

You see, Jesus didn't call those fishermen because they were SPECIAL, he called them because they were NOT special. They were just like you and me, they were ORDINARY, REGULAR people. And he called THEM, because he calls ALL of us. We are ALL called to SHARE our faith, to SPREAD the good news, to FISH for PEOPLE.

Now honestly, MOST of us AREN'T called to LEAVE our families and our life's work behind, but we ARE called to leave our BAD ATTITUDES behind. To live our lives with PURPOSE and make a DIFFERENCE.

Someone once said there's a HUGE difference between having a JOB at church and having a MINISTRY at church.

- If you are doing it because no one ELSE will, it's a JOB. If you are doing it to serve the LORD, it's a MINISTRY.
- If you're doing it just well enough to get BY, it's a job. If you're doing it to the BEST of your ability, it's a ministry.
- If you'll do it ONLY so long as it doesn't interfere with OTHER activities, it's a job. If you're committed to STAYING with it, EVEN when it means letting other things GO, it's a ministry.
- If it's HARD to get excited about, it's a job. If it's almost impossible NOT to get excited about it, it's a ministry.

I love that. I think It's SO TRUE that we shouldn't just limit it to just CHURCH work; it applies to EVERYTHING we do. We should do EVERYTHING to the glory of God.

Martin Luther said this: "The maid who sweeps her kitchen is doing the will of God JUST as much as the MONK who prays – not because she may sing a Christian hymn as she sweeps, but because God LOVES clean floors. The Christian shoemaker does his Christian duty not by putting little crosses on the shoes, but by making GOOD shoes, because God is interested in good CRAFTSMANSHIP."

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "If a man is called to be a street-sweeper, he should SWEEP STREETS EVEN as Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets SO WELL that ALL the hosts of heaven and earth will pause and say, HERE lived a GREAT street-sweeper, who DID his job well."

You see, it's not ABOUT what we DO; it's about what we ARE – we are CHOSEN, we are CALLED. And God's call isn't simply to DO something, but rather to BE something, a child of God. And BEING comes BEFORE doing. BEING even MAKES doing POSSIBLE.

We are called to be a light in the darkness, just as Jesus was a light to the NATIONS. We are called to DO what we do SO WELL, that it brings GLORY to God, that it SHINES like a light in the darkness.

I knew a man named Rick Peterson, who passed away a few years back. He was a mailman, a very ORDINARY job. But I heard STORIES from people on his route. They told people that they were going to the funeral of their mailman, and their friends would ask them why, and they'd tell them how Rick was NO ORDINARY mailman. He CARED about the people on his route. He stopped and TALKED to them if they were outside. He KNEW if they were going through something difficult, and he CONSOLED them. Most mail carriers just stuff mailboxes; Rick was a light shining in the darkness.

And he was a bus driver too. Now some bus drivers are gruff. They have nicknames like "Scary Larry." But Rick was one of those drivers that the kids LOVED. He CARED about them, and they loved him right back. We've ALL KNOWN bus drivers like that. Sometimes, in those early morning pick-up hours, they were LITERALLY a LIGHT SHINING in the darkness.

This is what we MEAN by the word "vocation." That word COMES from the LATIN for "calling." Your work isn't just a JOB; it's a CALLING. You have BEEN CALLED, not just to DO something, but to BE something. You are a child of God. You have been CHOSEN. You have been GIVEN your interests and your talents, so that you can DO your work to the glory of God. You have been called to be a LIGHT in the darkness. You have been called to be a DISCIPLE, and EVERYTHING you do, EVEN your WORK, is a place to MINISTER to others.

I don't know if you've noticed it, but we put this right on our bulletins. Who are the ministers at First Lutheran? YOU are! You, the people of First Lutheran, are the ministers of this place.

But not just HERE. You are God's ministers WHEREVER and WHENEVER you let your light shine. Let it SHINE, brothers and sisters. Let it shine. Let it shine. Let it shine. Amen.