

Sermon – Matthew 4:12-23  
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Grace Lutheran Church  
3 Epiphany – Year A  
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“What’s the Catch?”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Yesterday, we bravely traveled through the great non-snowstorm of 2020. Our destination was Madison, WI. Our purpose? To catch the University of Wisconsin women’s hockey team in action against Minnesota, a battle pitting not just neighbor against neighbor, but the two best teams in the nation against one another. As a Wisconsin native indoctrinated early into a love for the Badgers, my allegiance was never in doubt. Which is a funny thing, because not only had I never met any of these athletes; I’d barely heard of them before yesterday. Nevertheless, I was soon caught up in the action, cheering on the skaters with 2,500 of my newest friends. With each shot saved, I exhaled in relief. When the Badgers found the back of the net, which they did three times, I rose in excitement and let loose a raucous cheer. No, I didn’t know these Badgers, but I was caught up in a wave of excitement. Not only excitement but victory, too. Our team got the win, three to zero. A fun day all in all, all the better because my team won. And winning matters, right?
2. Matthew’s gospel today tells us of the fray Jesus enters. Fresh off his baptism and the temptation in the wilderness, Jesus journeys to a new home, Capernaum. But if Jesus is looking to catch people with a winning pedigree, he’s gone to the wrong place. Let’s assume, however, that Jesus acts with intention. Why, then, does he go to the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali? The territory held by these two tribes is precisely where the kingdom began to

unravel 750 years earlier when, during the Syro-Ephraimite War, the Assyrian King Tiglath-Pileser III began the destruction of Israel, annexing the lands of Naphtali and Zebulun and beginning the end of Israel and Judah. The first, destroyed. The second, exiled. God's plan for God's people seemingly come to an end. Losers in the geopolitical realm and lost through sin from their God. The only real bright side is that it's fun to say Tiglath-Pileser III. The point, though, is that when Jesus begins his work, he doesn't start with the winners. He goes to the lost, the losers. And from there, in that darkness, the prophecy of Isaiah will begin to be fulfilled; for Jesus comes not simply to rescue and restore Israel. Jesus comes as a light to the Gentiles. Jesus comes to all who sit in darkness. Jesus brings the dawn of a new kingdom that will far exceed that which came before.

3. As a new light shining in dark places, Jesus is naturally going to find the best and brightest to help him in his work, yes? We might imagine that as a rabbi in need of students, he'd head down to the local yeshiva and scan the dean's list. Instead, he goes down to the lakeshore. In the mysterious calculus of God's grace, God's Son goes to those we wouldn't expect. Not because they are people without worth or value, but because their worth and value rests in that which the world doesn't esteem. Whatever other qualities they possess or lack, their value is determined by the fact that Jesus chooses them, and their worth shown forth as they drop their nets and follow. The choice is not their own, for the call of Christ puts to death the old person and raises up a new person of faith. Faith, as Martin Luther wrote in 1522, is a "divine work in us." "It is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done them, and is constantly doing them." "Faith," Luther continues, "is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that the believer would stake his or [her] life on it a thousand times." A life-staking faith. This is what Jesus

finds in – no, calls forth from – Andrew and Simon, James and John. They drop their nets, leave their boats. They follow Jesus and fish for people.

4. Which would be a nice enough place to end the story, if only we didn't know better. These four disciples and their friends muddled their way through discipleship school, and the church they founded nearly foundered. A few decades later, we see another faithful follower, Paul, writing to the people of Corinth, who have managed to be the church incorrectly in almost every way. Paul will get around to discussing their abuse of the sacrament and their general depravity, but his first priority is their factionalism. Some say they belong to Cephas, others to Paul, others to Apollos. The very fact of the Corinthians' disagreement is their problem. Do not all belong to Christ? Is there a root, a goal, of faith other than Jesus? Was someone else crucified for them? They were looking for the best follower of Jesus to follow and getting lost in the process. The church, to be the church, must follow Jesus and Jesus only. These are comforting words for us. They take on a new nuance in light of the departures of the Pastors Wegner. Our issue is not factionalism; it is good, honest grief. And I grieve with you. But Paul's words of challenge to the Corinthians are words of comfort to us. Because you don't belong to, are not saved by, the Wegners. Or by Geiseman or Lueking or Modahl. And goodness knows that you belong to Lyle and Costello no more than you belong to Abbott and Costello! You belong to Christ, in whose cross and through whose empty tomb you have been saved, with all the other lost fools of this world.
  
5. We, the church of Christ in this time and place, will follow Jesus. In the midst of change and through the seemingly mundane work of congregation meetings, we will follow Jesus. In a world where many others seek to set a hook in us, we will follow Jesus. In a nation rent by partisan rancor, we will follow Jesus. We won't always get it right, but Jesus' Spirit is working right in us. And in Jesus' name, we go and we fish. We go about the holy work of catching people up into the death and resurrection of Jesus that first caught

us. We cast broad, capacious nets, celebrating that Jesus' work encompasses all. We fish following Jesus, knowing that it is by preaching good news in a bad news world, that it is by working for healing in a dying world, that we catch people up into the relentless work of God's salvation. And we fish knowing that we will get it wrong. Over and over again. But getting in wrong just gives God the chance to catch us again. As the preacher (and friend of Grace) Fred Niedner writes, "The net sometimes tears, as it did when believers in Corinth misunderstood the way this fishing works. They fell into quarrelling and division over who fished most productively. Paul mended the net with the gospel and a reminder that all of us get knotted into the net through crucifixion, Christ's and ours with him, not through our own or someone else's cleverness. Just picture a net, and all those tiny crosses, as a crucified multitude tied together and passing through the world."

6. That's how Jesus does it, good people of Grace. He comes to you and calls you. In his death he makes you alive. And in the foolishness of faith that proclaims a new world beginning through an old crucifixion, Jesus puts you to work. Not because you're good enough, and not because you're not. Simply because he calls you, catches you, sets you free. So, foolish losers, get to work, for the Spirit is at work in you – working good and peace and healing. And that is the power of God at work in the cross. It is the beginning of the kingdom, and the hope for the world – not just for God's first people, but for all people who wait in darkness. It probably won't look like winning. Not yet, anyway. No matter. Follow Jesus. Fish for people. Keep faith. Follow Jesus. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.