

"FOLLOW ME!"
November 10, 1991

TEXT: Matthew 4:19 "And he said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.'"

On this day when we receive new members into the fellowship of our church, it seems appropriate that we recall the time centuries ago when Jesus called his first disciples. As we just heard, Jesus was walking by the Sea of Galilee when he saw Peter and Andrew, who were casting their nets into the sea. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." And immediately they left their nets and followed him.

Most of us have heard those words before. Perhaps some have heard them so often we do not think very much about their meaning. And that is unfortunate, for what we do today is --or at least ought to be-- directly related to that old familiar story. Whether we are long time members of the church or are just becoming members this morning, like Peter and Andrew we, too, are called by Christ to follow him. But what does that mean? That is what I would like us to think about now.

First of all, it means that we are called to do a job. Jesus did not say, "Follow me and I will make you feel good about yourself." He did not say, "Follow me and people will look up to you as pillars of your community." He did not say, "Follow me and you won't have to do anything you don't want to do." He said, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men."

Jesus entered human history for the same reason a lifeguard plunges into the foaming surf --to save those who are in danger of "going under." And he calls his disciples to follow him in that effort. Some may define "going under" as going to Hell. Others may think of it more as making their own Hell here on earth. But the principle is the same.

God did not send his Son into the world for sake of the church but for the sake of the world. The world outside the church. Yes, and often enough, the world that hates and belittles the church. And Jesus established his Church to carry on his saving work when he was no longer around to do it himself.

We exist as God's instrument for the world's salvation. As awesome as it may seem, our Master left no other means for making the world aware of God's love or for reconciling the world to God's will. There is no "Plan B" --no contingency plan. He chose us for that purpose, and his Kingdom flourishes or fails because of us.

Unfortunately, many of us are uncomfortable with that role. The very words, "evangelist" and "evangelism," make us cringe. We ask ourselves, "Who are we to interfere in someone else's affairs, to meddle in someone else's life?" We conveniently forget that, as John Henry Newman wrote, "The church was framed for the express purpose of interfering, or as irreligious men will say, 'meddling,' with the world! Christ called the church into being for this very purpose."

Now it may surprise some of you to hear a minister say this, but I, too, am one who by nature would like to shy away from evangelism. I am more comfortable trying to serve "established Christians" than trying to make new ones. When it comes to evangelism, like some of you, I would like to pray, as Jesus prayed in different context, "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me!" But, try as I might, I can not shake the conviction that God intended our churches to do more than just trade members back and forth and confirm our own children. And I am troubled by Ruel Howe's famous parable, which I would like to share with you now. It goes like this.

"There was a certain stretch of rocky coastline which was especially treacherous to navigation. Its fierce storms often drove unfortunate mariners to their destruction on its rocky shoals. Finally, one heroic man decided to do something about it. He gathered together a group of people and established a lifesaving society. They bought a boat and trained themselves to use it even in the fiercest storms. And, whenever there was a shipwreck, they rowed out and saved the lives of those on board.

"Gradually, the fame of this little band increased, especially when their gallant leader lost his life in the work. More and more people joined the society, and it became bigger and bigger, richer and richer. With their new resources they bought more boats and built a bigger, more luxurious, clubhouse.

"Then a strange thing happened. After a while, some of the members began to complain. The work, they said, was inconvenient. Besides, some of those who were saved dragged water and sand into the clubhouse and sat on the furniture in their wet clothing. And some of them were not as appreciative as they might be or had strange ideas about how the society ought to be run.

So, as time went by, they abandoned their lifesaving altogether. And, if you should visit that rocky coastline today, you will find that fierce storms still blow ships to their destruction. But many of the seamen now perish because no one mans the boats or comes out to save them. Instead, the members of the society gather inside their clubhouse, reading of past rescues and singing the praises of their illustrious founder."

Perhaps you can see why this parable troubles me. Jesus came "To seek and to save those who are lost." And, knowing that he would not be around forever, he called disciples and said to

them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." On the night before he died, he prayed for them --and for us who follow them-- saying, "Father . . . as Thou didst send me into the world, so have I sent them into the world." And then he said an awesome and terrible thing. He said, "And for their sake I consecrate myself that they also may be consecrated in truth."

In other words, Jesus submitted to the agony and shame of the cross to ensure our devotion to his seeking, saving work. To give us the example, the motivation, and the inner quality of life we would need to "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every living creature." And while, in my frailty, I might want to pray, "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me," in my heart I know that it is not possible. I know that we can never be mature Christians unless we are willing to be evangelists. And I know I must add, as Jesus did, "Nevertheless, not my will but Thine be done."

Now that does not mean that I am about to hit the sawdust trail. It does not mean you can expect to find me with a floppy black Bible and a tambourine out in front of the Chancery Pub. Some may evangelize that way, but I do not believe it is what God wants for me or for this church.

There are many ways to present the Good News of God's saving love and power. But we must present it somehow --and present it to those who are out there drowning and not just to those who lie safely on the beach or sit comfortably in the clubhouse with a cup of hot coffee and a set of dry clothes.

When Jesus called his first disciples, he promised to make them fishers of men. And, if there is one thing fishers have to do, it is to go out after the fish. There are many kinds of nets and many kinds of lures. But, to catch fish, you have to go where the fish are. You can not just set up a basket on the shore and expect fish to jump into it of their own free will.

I honestly believe there are many people here in greater Milwaukee who need and want what this church has to offer. Somehow or other, you and I must let them know that we are here and that they are welcome. And you lay members are our best resource for doing so. Studies show that most people come to a church the first time because some friend or relative invited them. Beautiful music and good preaching may bring them back, but it rarely gets them here in the first place.

Many of you have friends and neighbors, family and business colleagues who would benefit, as we do, from a mature faith and a caring fellowship. It is not meddling to share with them how much your church means to you or to invite them to come with you next Sunday. We do not hesitate to recommend a restaurant, or a book, a movie we enjoy. Can we do less when it comes to the most important thing in life? After all, that is why we are here --as disciples of Him who said, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."