

Follow Me

Third Sunday after Epiphany

Matthew 4:12-25

A couple of Wednesdays ago I made a surprising discovery. On Wednesday afternoons I volunteer at Loma Elementary School about a half a mile down the road. I spend half of my time helping kids with their reading in one of the second grade classrooms and the other half of my time helping kids with their artwork in one of the first grade classrooms. A couple of Wednesdays ago, at the end of the school day, one of the staff members who knows that I am a Pastor told me to check out what was going on in room 12. I walked in and, to my surprise, I saw a whole classroom full of school kids of different ages and grades singing, reading, and learning about God and what he has done for us in Jesus. At a public school, every Wednesday after the final bell has rung, a group of kids, led by one of the teachers and a group of volunteers, gathers to receive Jesus when he is offered.

Gathering to receive Jesus when he is offered. Many of you know that I did not start attending Church regularly until I was a senior in high school. At that point I attended a youth group with friends and attended the Sunday morning Divine Service regularly by myself. At that time, as a senior in high school, I referred to myself in many ways—a church goer, a Christian, a Lutheran. It wasn't until many years later and immersed in my studies of the Bible preparing to be a Pastor that I realized more accurately who I was and what I was doing—I was following Jesus. Like the group of kids at Loma Elementary School every Wednesday afternoon after school, I was going where Jesus was present. I was receiving Jesus where he offered himself. Today in the Gospel reading we see a description of what it means to be a follower of Jesus as a Christian. One thing that our Gospel reading this morning wants to teach us is that following Jesus as a Christian means receiving Jesus when he offers himself to you. So who are we as followers of Jesus who delight in receiving Jesus when he offers himself? Our Gospel reading tells us.

As a follower of Jesus you are a part of the Reign of Heaven/the Reign of the Gospel. Just as here on earth we are a part of the United States as citizens and live under the leadership of various elected government leaders, so also as followers of Jesus here on earth we are also “citizens of heaven” (Phil 3:20; Eph 2:19). In our Gospel reading it says, “Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (4:17). The Kingdom of heaven is also referred to as the kingdom of the Gospel. Since the Greek word for “kingdom” is a verbal-noun or action-noun it is best to say, “reign” of God. This puts emphasis on God's action in this world. He does something. Moreover, a kingdom cannot move but the King can! He can move elsewhere to reign! As Luther writes in his famous Christmas hymn, “From Heaven above to earth I come” (*LSB* 358). When Jesus says, “the reign of God is near” he is referring to himself. I am here! I have come! The promise of God is fulfilled! Immanuel, “God with us” is now here in the flesh! As a follower of Jesus, you are part of his reign. You are brought into God's kingdom.

There is a prayer that we pray often before meals called the “Common Table Prayer.” You all are familiar with it, I am sure. In last month's Atonement Lutheran newsletter I even posted an article that someone had written about the meaning of the Common Table Prayer. In the article the author speaks about what it means to pray “Come, Lord Jesus.” The author tells us that it is not simply an invitation for Jesus to show up at the meal we happen to be eating. Rather, the prayer casts the meal we happen to be eating in the light of eternity. “Come Lord Jesus” is the Church's cry for our

Lord Jesus to come to us in his grace, mercy, and love (Dr. David W. Loy, “Come, Lord Jesus,” *Lutheran Witness*, June/July 2011). When Jesus comes and announces that the “kingdom of heaven is near” (Mt 4:17), he is telling us that he is the King who has brought the reign of heaven here to earth. He is present to give us his grace, mercy, and love. As followers of Jesus we receive the presence of Jesus here and now, and live in the presence of his grace, mercy, and love where and when he offers himself.

We also learn in our Gospel reading that as followers of Jesus we are called by Jesus. You are called to belong to him (Ro 1:6). You were called to belong to him when you were baptized into his name. He says to you personally, “Come, follow me.” When you were baptized into the name of our God you put on Jesus and now live “in Christ” and “in his Spirit” (Ro 8). In order to follow Jesus and be a part of his reign here on earth, you need to be called. In our Gospel reading we see Jesus caring a great deal about the reign of God and about calling ordinary people like you and me. God has regard for the ordinary. What a comforting truth! He announces that the reign of God is here, he is present and then he goes and calls ordinary people to be a part of it, to follow him as loyal subjects of the King and citizens of his reign and kingdom. He calls ordinary fisherman—two sets of brothers. They follow Jesus. Other ordinary, plain-old-folk follow him too. We read that “great crowds” followed him from nations surrounding Israel (Mt 4:25). You can marvel and rejoice in this miracle that you are a disciple, a follower of Jesus. He cares enough to call you to belong to him and be a part of his reign, his kingdom.

We can review so far what our Gospel reading has told us about what it means for us to be followers of Jesus. You are called to belong to him. You are a part of the reign of God on this earth in the person of Jesus. So now you follow Jesus by regularly going where he is present and receiving him where he is offered. You are called to do what he wants you to do. You were not called in the same way as the Twelve Apostles—the two sets of brothers from our reading. They were trained with Jesus and by Jesus. They were sent out to be overseers and under-shepherds of other Christians, other followers. They had their vocation as overseer, under-shepherd, or pastor, as we call them today.

You have your vocation (calling) that you live after being called to faith. It is different than that of “pastor” but God still wants to use you to do his important work of making followers of Jesus. He still wants to use you to bring others into his reign of heaven here on earth. He still wants to use you to do his work of calling others to belong to him so that they might receive his grace where and when it is offered. Through his Holy Spirit at work within you “he will make you a fisher of men, or business man of men, or accountant of men, or mechanic of men, or whatever” (see Jeff Gibbs, “Homiletical Help on Mt 4:12-25,” *Concordia Journal*, Fall 1995 for this insight). The key is living with him as he is with us—following Jesus means receiving him and his grace where he offers it. He always offers himself on Sunday Morning here in the Divine Service. He also offers himself after hours at a nearby public Elementary school in room 12, in the pages of your Portals of Prayer devotional book, in the midst of a gathering of followers for a Bible Study, and even through that seemingly ordinary “Common Table Prayer.” Being present where he has promised to be present. Through us he does what he wants to do—Calling, saving, healing, joining those of all nations to the Reign of God here on earth. And when we continue to follow Jesus by receiving him and his gifts of grace and forgiveness when he offers himself he is able to do great work through us. Amen.