

In the name of the Father and of the ✝ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Last Sunday, as we gathered for worship, our prayers seemed to speak directly to us as we prepared for our congregational meeting. It was a total accident on my part—or, more accurately, the work of the Holy Spirit. You may not realize this, but the prayer of the day, first intercessory prayer petition, offertory prayer, and post-communion prayer are from a collection of prayers written by a pastor friend of mine from Minnesota. He also writes the “Word for Today” piece in the bulletin. These are common prayers, used in many churches through the world in fact. But last week, the prayers all helped point us to the Holy Spirit, and the need to listen to the Spirit to hear what we are called to do. I couldn’t have written prayers that were so on-point. Once again, the Holy Spirit demonstrates our human weaknesses and shortcomings, and the glory of God.

And it has happened again today in our lessons. The “Gospel Message” in the bulletin comes from our friends at Augsburg-Fortress Press, the church publishing house, and it is their title, “Evangelism 101,” not some editorial comment by your pastor. Our Gospel this morning is John’s account of John the Baptist identifying Jesus to John’s own disciples and the calling of the first of Jesus’ disciples—Andrew and Simon. People who did not know Jesus, or had only heard about him, are brought into fellowship with him. What a message for us!

As I prepared this sermon, I was reading some of Martin Luther’s sermons and lectures on this Gospel. At one point, Luther was addressing the apparent disconnect between the account in Matthew of the calling of the first apostles—brief and to the point, Jesus says, “Follow me”—and the version we hear this morning. Luther’s explanation made a lot of sense to me, and I think you will see how it is helpful to us as well. Luther describes the discord thusly:

“When Christ was baptized by John, He did not have any disciples as yet and now began to preach. He did not behave in an unusual manner; but He was unpretentious, mingled congenially with the people, and associated freely with all. Thus one after the other gradually came to Him and rallied about Him, today one, tomorrow another. John the Evangelist narrates here

that after Christ's Baptism Andrew came, others later; thus one after the other found his way to Him, sought His companionship, and eagerly listened to what He said. And these, as you see here, He received in a friendly way. He could adapt himself to the people so that they loved and followed Him.

Thus John's theme is not the calling of the apostles into office; it is their congenial association with Christ."<sup>1</sup>

Do you hear Luther's words here? The point that John the Evangelist is trying to make here is the *congeniality* of Jesus, focusing on how Jesus welcomes all into his midst, shares with them his message, joins in fellowship around the table, even sleeps under the same roof with many of them. Jesus became friends with people first, and then—and only then—did he invite them to come and follow him as his disciples. Here in the Gospel according to John *the Evangelist*—"sharer of the Good News"—we get a brief, but huge, lesson in how Jesus operated as an evangelist himself.

Having been called by the Holy Spirit to be "little Christs" to our neighbors, and having been encouraged throughout our lives to imitate our Lord Jesus Christ in our own lives, so that we might bring glory and honor to God Almighty, we have now been given a very clear lesson in one way to do just that. Listen carefully, my friends, so that we might learn this lesson well.

In order to bring new people into the Christian community, one should:

- First, go to where people are found.
- Second, talk to everyone there.
- Third, make friends with them.
- Fourth, invite them to become disciples of Jesus Christ.

---

<sup>1</sup>Martin Luther, vol. 22, *Luther's Works, Vol. 22 : Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 1-4*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald and Helmut T. Lehmann, Luther's Works, 22:182 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999, c1957).

Anyone who wanted to come and listen, learn, and work with Jesus was welcome. Folks came and went all of the time. As with any community, there were those who were closest to Jesus and served to help lead and organize the work—the 12 apostles, in this case—and those who were in the second-tier of involvement—the seventy-two disciples called to go out to the communities in pairs, for example. There were countless more who came to hear Jesus and learn from him—groups like the 5,000 who were fed from five loaves and two fish, or those who gathered on Mount of the Beatitudes outside Capernaum for the Sermon on the Mount, or those along the shore of the Galilee who were so great in number that Jesus had to go out a bit from shore in a boat and preach from there.

As Christ was congenial, warm, welcome, and friendly to everyone he could meet, so should we be the same way. For far too long we Lutherans especially have made too big a deal about “evangelism” and too little a deal about making friends and welcoming people into our circle. For our parents and grandparents, language was the big barrier—even among Lutherans. Finns and Germans and Swedes all had their own churches, and if you didn’t speak that language—tough. In our time, skin color and socio-economic status have often kept us from being as open and welcoming as we should be. It is as if we have said, “As long as you at least look and sound like us, you can be in the room with us.” And let’s not cast the stone too far without casting it right here at ourselves. How long have we said to people, “You haven’t been here long enough...” or “You are not old enough...” as a reason to really say, “I don’t want you to be involved, except on my terms.”

Congenial, warm, welcoming are all characteristics that describe our Lord Jesus Christ, whom God sent into the world not to condemn the world, but to save it and all people who hear the Word and come to believe in Him. Jesus was so congenial, warm, and welcoming that he was ready, willing, and able to do whatever was necessary to bring people to him and glorify his Father in heaven. That commitment including going all the way to Calvary, to be hanged on the Cross with common criminals so that he might die for the very people he had welcomed and with whom he shared his life. In dying on the Cross, Jesus provided us his greatest, most-heartwarming gift—the forgiveness of all our sins. In his rising from the grave, he shared with us the promise of the resurrection of our lives as well. We

don't have to do any of that. We are called to simply make friends, share the Good News, and welcome all those around us. Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, will handle the rest, and then glory will be brought to God. Amen.