

Sermon for 3 Epiphany, Year A
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Holy Nativity, Plano
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Simon and Andrew, James and John, were living comfortable middle-class lives, fishing in the Sea of Galilee. They were businessmen of Capernaum. St. Mark tells us that Zebedee, the father of James and John, had employees helping him with the fishing. You don't hire help, unless business is doing well enough to expand the work. So these people weren't wealthy, by any means, but they had a normal, comfortable existence. They were well off, and they were in charge of their own lives.

But Jesus comes along the beach and ends all that. This isn't the first encounter they've had with Jesus. Some met him while John was still baptizing in the Jordan. And they've heard him preach in Capernaum. But now he simply says, "Follow me." And the remarkable thing is that they do. They leave everything. Jesus doesn't call them to particular job assignments. He hasn't spelled out how they will organize to build the kingdom of God. He simply calls them to follow. There doesn't seem to be any clear agenda, except to be with Jesus and do whatever he asks of them.

It doesn't necessarily mean that they will never see their family or friends again. But it might. It doesn't necessarily mean they will never fish again. But it might. Jesus might have called them and then settled right down in Capernaum, letting them continue their trade. And outwardly their lives would have looked exactly the same. But there would always have been the understanding that their lives were his to do with as he pleased. Their lives were not their own. They had left everything to follow him.

This is what disciples of Jesus do. Just as the Galilean fishermen left their comfortable, normal lives to follow Jesus, so must we. And in place of the ordinary lives that we give him, he gives us extraordinary ones. Your new extraordinary life may look externally very much like your old one. He may leave you in place to raise the children he has given you, or run the business he has given you. Or he may take you halfway around the world to die hanging upside down on a cross, like Simon Peter.

None of that really matters. What matters is that it is all his. Our lives are no longer ours. They belong to Jesus Christ, who called us, and died for us, and rose again to conquer death for us. We don't get to do whatever we want. We do what he wants. And that will always turn out better for us than what we thought we wanted. But if we don't remember that, if we turn back to our own way and disregard what is required of us, then we will be judged, just as God's people are always judged when they abandon the will of their Lord.

Now with all of that in mind, let's take a look at St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. It seems that the Christians in Corinth had forgotten. They had begun to think that the church was about them, rather than about everyone following Jesus. That's why they were divided into these factions. Why do you think they described themselves as followers of Paul or Apollos or Cephas? Paul and Apollos and Cephas didn't set up these factions. All three of them thought of themselves as fellow-laborers and brothers, members of one body. But here are people setting them up as the founders of sects. The only reason they would do that is because they were attracted to some idea that they heard from one or the other of these teachers. And they wanted to remake everyone and everything in their own image.

Notice that Paul actually addresses those who purport to follow *him*. "Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? He's saying, "Hey, don't set me up as your idol! I'm not the object of your worship! Turn back around and follow Jesus. He's the one who gives life."

St. Paul goes on in this funny little passage where he dithers about who he did or did not baptize in Corinth. But his meaning is clear. He doesn't even remember everyone whom he baptized, not because he doesn't care about the people, but because it doesn't matter to him who baptized them. He's not trying to start a following of his own. He's trying to tell people the good news of Jesus Christ.

"For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel," he says, "and not with the wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power." Paul must have spoken eloquently for people to want to set him up as an idol. But his point here is that he wasn't just being clever. He wasn't preaching his own ideas. The real power isn't in clever ideas, theology, intellectual constructs. The real power is in the cross of Christ, in his blood poured out for the sins of the world. That's really powerful stuff. It washes souls clean.

We're not saved by what we believe; we're saved by Jesus on the cross. We're not saved by coming to a pretty church with a pretty liturgy; we're saved by the cross of Christ. We're not saved by pursuing our own aesthetic or intellectual or moral programs for the world. We are all saved from ourselves and from the world into Christ's body, where we are all one with him. And once we are one with him, we are one with each other.

That's why St. Paul is so scandalized by the party spirit in Corinth. If we are all part of Christ, then we should all be of one mind. There should be no dissension. That doesn't mean that there won't be disagreements between us. Sometimes we will have to work out together what it is that Jesus is asking of us. And sometimes we may have conflicting desires about issues that aren't eternal. But those discussions must never devolve into party politics in Christ's church. And if they do, it is a sign that we have elevated our own desires and preferences above the will of Christ, which is that we love one another.

I pray that that may never happen at Holy Nativity. And like St. Paul, I pray that you would never follow me, but always follow Jesus with me, to the glory of God.