

“What Follows?” (Matthew 4:18-22) Epiphany 3, January 27, 2008

Before I go any further, let me apologize to all of you women for using the old “non-inclusive” wording: “**I will make you fishers of men.**” Just so you know, I have a good reason for doing this. I looked at some newer translations -- “*I will make you fishers of people.*” “*I will make you fishers of humans.*” – but they just sounded awkward. So I turned to the NRSV, and it sounded better – “**I will make you fish for people**” – but theologically, that’s just wrong. “**I will make you fish**”? When Jesus calls us, He doesn’t make us do anything. Each step of the way we have a choice whether to follow, whether to trust, whether to obey. There is no coercion – like: “*Follow Me, and I will make you teach Sunday School.*” There is no force – like: “*Follow Me, and I will make you care about the lost.*” There is only a promise that if we follow Jesus, He will make us into something far better than we are; He will make our lives into something much more meaningful.

Case in point: take Peter. He was a small-time fisherman, scratching out a living on the Sea of Galilee; kind of rough around the edges, with no hopes or dreams beyond making ends meet. Then Jesus came to him with a call and a promise: that if Peter would follow Him, Jesus would raise his “fishing” to a whole higher level! Jesus would make him into someone who’d reach thousands of people with the Gospel, touch thousands of lives with God’s grace, lead thousands of souls to eternal salvation – which is exactly what happened. In fact, Peter became known as the “Big Fisherman.” But it wasn’t because Jesus made Him be the “Big Fisherman.” Jesus made him into the “Big Fisherman,” and this only happened bit by bit as Peter chose to follow Him, chose to trust Him, chose to obey Him day by day. There’s really a big difference here! So big I could preach a whole sermon on it! In fact...I think I will! Because what all this highlights is the importance of our choices even after we’ve made the choice to follow Jesus.

Now, even as I say “choice,” some of our more theologically-precise Lutherans may be thinking: *Wait just a minute, preacher-boy! If we’re going to talk about choice, let’s talk first about the Lord’s choice of us, not our choice of Him. After all, didn’t Jesus say, “You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you to bear fruit that will last”?* *Our choice wouldn’t mean diddly if the Lord hadn’t first chosen to save us by grace alone. In fact, the only way we’re able to make that choice is by the Spirit working in us. Scripture is clear: our choice is always only a response to the Lord’s choice of us.*

If that is what you’re thinking – because you are such a theologically-precise Lutheran – bravo! You’re exactly right! Our godly choices are only a response to God’s choice of us. And our godly choices are only possible because of the Spirit working in us. So far, so good! But you know, being saved doesn’t mean we lose our ability to make wrong choices. Far from it! We are still quite able to ignore the Holy Spirit. We are still quite able to rationalize doing what we want in spite of the Holy Spirit. So what does this mean? As much as we Lutherans

may emphasize the Lord's choice of us, and as much as others may emphasize our choice of Him, now that we're save we all still do need to pay attention to our choices. For godly or otherwise, our choices impact spiritual growth. Godly or otherwise, our choices affect what kind of people we become. Remember: Jesus is a gentleman. He will not make us do anything. For Him to make us into something, we need to follow, trust, and obey Him – bit by bit, day by day. A one-time choice to follow Jesus is only the beginning. The real question is what follows our choice to follow.

And when you think about this in everyday terms, doesn't it just make sense? Suppose a man and woman decide to get married. Great! But important as that choice is, the quality of their marriage will depend on the choices that follow. And we're not just talking about the big ones, are we? I'm sure you married folks will agree – the little choices can make quite a difference, too. Little kindnesses can build the marriage up. Little digs can wear it down. Little "thank you's" can build a marriage up. Little grudges can wear it down. Following through on little commitments as opposed to dropping the ball on said commitments – need I say more?! Choices do make a difference – even seemingly little choices.

And oh, is that true in the Christian life as well! In fact, if we could talk to Peter, I'll bet he would tell us this very thing. You know, as I was reflecting on our text earlier this week, I thought about Peter's choices after making the choice to follow, how Jesus might have used them to make Peter into "the Big Fisherman." It occurred to me that probably the most important choices were little ones we can only spot reading between the lines. Yes, there were big positive choices – the best being his confession of Jesus as "**the Messiah, the Son of the living God.**" And yes, there were big negative choices – the worst being his denial of Jesus: "**I do not know the man.**" But if we could talk to Peter, I'll bet he'd tell us that how Jesus gave him a heart for the lost, how Jesus shaped him into "the Big Fisherman," was through little nitty-gritty choices that came up day by day.

For instance, I can imagine him telling us how much his **attitude** needed to change. *My friends, he might say, I will never forget the first time I saw Jesus reach out to a leper! Talk about disgusting! Or for that matter, when He reached out to a tax collector...or a gentile...or a prostitute...or some of those poor, bedeviled folks that sought Him out. All my life, I had avoided those people completely – as would any respectable person. But following Jesus, there was no way to do that. Just the opposite. He kept welcoming those people and expected us to do the same. So again and again, I had a choice to make: Treat those people like everyone else would or treat them like Jesus did? Then after a while, the choice went even deeper: Look at those people like everyone else would or see them with the eyes of Jesus? And it was tough – man, was it tough! – but I'll tell you, I never would have developed a heart for the lost if Jesus hadn't used all these choices to shape my attitude into one like His own! My old sinful nature would only see the outside of a person. Jesus helped me look deeper. Not just to see the disgusting outside of a leper, but the precious soul*

within, and the heart hungering for the love of God. Not just to see the contemptible outside of a sinner, but the precious soul within, and the spirit thirsting for divine mercy. For that matter, He helped me look past the well-fed, well-clothed outside of a person society admires to see the starving, shrunken soul inside that also needs what only Jesus can give. Choice by choice, He changed my attitude. Choice by choice, He enlarged my heart. Mind you, not all my choices were good ones. Yet even through not-so-good ones Jesus shaped me – chiefly by showing me my need of forgiveness, my need to trust in Him, not myself. And yes, showing me how much I was like those people I so despised. At first, I thought I was such a man of God just making the choice to follow Jesus, but that was actually the easy part. To keep on following, keep on trusting, keep on obeying – that was the real challenge. And the real opportunity. For that was how Jesus made me into a real man of God; in fact, how He made me into “the Big Fisherman” – by what followed my choice to follow.

Yes, I can well imagine Peter telling us something like this. But imagination aside, think about some other choices we know Peter made. Can't we see how Jesus used them to make Peter into the great apostle he became? How many choices where ego was an issue must have led him to write later on: **“Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, and in due time He will exalt you”**? How many signs of the Lord's care – like Jesus calming the wind and waves or feeding the 5,000 – later led Peter to encourage others: **“Cast all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you”**? How many fumbles – and successes – later moved him to write: **“Discipline yourselves; keep alert”**? How many inner struggles later led him to write: **“Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith...”** ? And how many proofs of the Lord's faithfulness – not the least, Jesus restoring Peter after Peter had denied Him three times – later led the Big Fisherman to assure others, **“After you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace...will restore, support, strengthen, and establish you”**? Peter's choices weren't always perfect. That wasn't the point. But learning to confess wrong choices, repent of them, and seek forgiveness; then learning humility, watchfulness, and discipline; then developing trust, understanding, and a heart for the lost – that was the point. That was very much the point of paying attention to his choices, paying attention to what followed the choice to follow...

...And that is the point for us today. Speaking for myself, one thing I've learned from watching *my* choices is how even the right ones can be tainted by selfishness and fear; motivation needs to be right, too. Another thing I've learned is how harmful it is to hold onto old hurts and how healing it is to forgive them. I've learned what kind of day I have when I do spend time in prayer...and when I don't. I've learned what impact a word of kindness can have. Ditto for a word of unkindness. But most of all, I've learned that precisely because my choices aren't always perfect, that is even more reason to keep on following, keep on trusting, keep on obeying day by day. Because I'm not going to improve on my own. I'm not going to improve without the Lord's help. Not to the degree the

Lord has in mind. And that He's willing to help – don't you find that amazing? That He wants to work in each of us, transform each of us, and make each of us into someone **“abundantly far greater than all we can ask or imagine”** – it's truly amazing! What love that shows! What possibilities! And what an incentive to pay closer attention to what follows our choice to follow!

None of us can know in advance what the Lord wants to make us into – anymore than Peter could when Jesus said, **“I'll make you fishers of men.”** Peter may have even thought to himself, *'Fishers of men'? What's up with that?* -- never guessing what great things he would do, never guessing how many lives he would change with the good news of salvation. But did he need to know what the Lord would make him into? No, and neither do we. What he needed was to follow Jesus – follow, trust, and obey Jesus -- then keep at it day after day. The Lord took care of the rest – as He will with you and me.

Whatever He makes us into, it'll be better than we can do on our own. Whatever He makes us into, it will have value both here and hereafter. Each of us has a vital role to carry out in God's battle for the souls of humankind. What it is will be clear enough on that day when meet the Lord in heaven. But in the meantime, let it be enough to just follow the Lord – wherever He has in mind. Let it be enough to just trust the Lord -- however anxious we may feel. Let it be enough to just obey the Lord – whatever He may require. **“He who has begun a good work in” us “will bring to completion.” “He is faithful, and He will do it.”** In fact, that is Jesus' promise to us this day. We've already heard His call. We've already made our choice to follow Him. But there are many more choices yet to be made, so now the real question is: *What follows our choice to follow?* Amen.

Prayer:

Loving God, we thank You for the grace that has saved us and is still available to transform our lives. Help us take full advantage of Your grace. Day by day, guide us by Your Spirit to make choices that open us to Your work and promote Your plan to make us into the kind of people You want us to be. Amen.