

## Matthew 4:12-25

We choose our friends. We choose our spouse. We choose our career path in life. For thirty-eight years the Supreme Court has given us the right to choose whether we want to abort, murder our unborn children or not; a choice which should never have been granted to American citizens. The ability to choose, the freedom of choice, has somehow made its way to the very top of the heap. In our society it has become a sacred right, higher on the scale than even "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

When it comes to our Christian faith, where does this right come into play? Are you a follower of Jesus because you decided to follow Him? Was there something about Him that attracted you? In the days when John the Baptist and Jesus walked the earth, that's how it was. Young men who desired to learn at the feet of a rabbi, a teacher, would take a look at all the different rabbis walking around and make a choice. They would follow the one that they felt would give them the greatest knowledge and wisdom. It was completely unheard of for a Jewish rabbi to call students to discipleship. To actually go out and invite young men to follow in your steps did not ever happen.

Until Jesus appeared on the scene. The way He did things was a complete break with the past. Instead of students coming to Him and choosing Him for a teacher, Jesus went out and called disciples to Himself. Walking along the Sea of Galilee He saw Simon and Andrew casting their nets into the water and He said to them, "Follow Me." In the same way He called James and John to be His disciples. Later on Jesus came up to Matthew sitting at his tax booth and said to Him, "Follow Me." For all of the twelve disciples, this is how they came to be Jesus' followers. "You did not choose Me," He told them, "I chose you."

These words were true for them; they are also just as true for us. You did not choose to love Jesus. He first chose to love you. You did not choose to adopt Jesus and His Church as your family. That's not how adoption works. You are God's adopted children because He called you in mercy. In your baptism He claimed you. He made you His Christian. He invited you to follow Him. He did not call you to be His apostle as He called Simon and Andrew, James and John, but He called you to be one of His forgiven saints. He cleansed you in those baptismal waters. He washed your sins away. He did not give you the option of choosing this. There is no such thing as freedom of choice when it comes to entering God's family of believers. We choose to go our own sinful way. We do not choose to go with God. We are like the fish in the Sea of Galilee.

Simon and Andrew, James and John were fishermen, and they had to use nets in order to catch fish. Why couldn't they just whistle or call out for the fish to swim to them? How easy that would be to earn a living as a fisherman. But it did not work that way. They had to use nets to drag the fish to their boats because the fish had no desire to be caught.

And we're fish in this way. If God left the choice up to us whether we wanted to be His followers or not, not one of us would be a Christian. We'd all be swimming still out in the dark, sinful waters of life. That's why Jesus used the net of Holy Baptism to draw us to Himself. And because we sinful fish daily like to swim back to our old sinful way of life, He is always casting, through His preachers, the net of His Holy Word over us to constantly lead us back to repentance and life in Him.

Now Jesus did not call you and catch you with His net for Him to feast upon you as normal fishermen would do. Rather Jesus dragged you to His boat, the Church, so that you again and again, throughout

your life, feast upon Him--His life-giving flesh and blood in His Holy Supper. Jesus is the fisherman who catches fish for the sake of the fish, for their benefit, our benefit, not for His.

Now when fishermen bring in a catch of fish, they sort through all the fish. They keep the good fish, but the poor, worthless fish they toss back into the sea. Jesus fishes in just the opposite way. The big, prize fish Jesus has no use for. Fish who think, "God must be pleased to have me in His Church. I'm a prize catch. I should be mounted on the wall. I serve so well. I give well. I'm the model Christian." Such fish, such proud sinners are not welcome in Jesus' boat.

But worthless, unwanted, unlovable fish--these are the fish Jesus keeps for Himself. Moses was a man, a fish who did not see how he could be useful to God. He did not speak well. He was a stammerer. Jeremiah was a boy much too young, he thought, to be useful to God. Jonah ran away when God first caught him. Matthew was a hated tax collector. Simon and Andrew, James and John were simple, rugged fishermen with no skills for being disciples of the Lord. Paul was working to destroy Jesus' Church when He pulled him into His boat.

And yet these are the fish God wanted for Himself. And friend, God wants you. Yes, you, the man, the woman, the child who struggles day after day to keep God's Commandments. You who fail to love God above all things, and your neighbor as yourself. God wants you even with all the failures in your life; even with all your sins, both public and secret. God does not want you because you're such a trophy fish. Just the opposite, He wants you, He loves you because there is nothing good in you, or in me. Jesus loves you not because there is something about you that makes you easy to love. He loves the unlovable. He loves wretched sinners. He calls those blessed whom the world despises. He shows mercy to those who have no worth.

And so we fish ought not be proud of ourselves as we are sitting here today in Jesus' boat in Augusta. We ought to be thankful. We ought to rejoice not that we chose Jesus, and not that He chose us because we are so great, but that in mercy He chose us. Just as in mercy He suffered for you. In mercy He laid down His life for you. Your God died for you, friend, and He did it purely out of a merciful heart. Your sins are all forgiven...all of them, public and private, because your God is merciful and Jesus died on a cross for you.

And so what can we do for Him...not because we have to, but because we want to? For Simon and Andrew, James and John, for Matthew and Paul it was clear. They left everything to follow Jesus. They left their nets, their boat, their tax booth. They left it all because of Jesus.

What can you and I leave for Jesus, out of love for Him? Our old sinful ways. We can leave our complaints, our grievances against our neighbor, our grudges against our fellow Christian, our old habit of always putting work and family before church, of putting ourself before Jesus. We can leave these all behind at Jesus' cross and come and follow Him.

We do want to be Christians, right? We do want to be Jesus' followers? We do believe that He truly forgives all our sins? That He is the Life, the Path to heaven? If so, and because we are grateful to Him for all of His benefits to us, let us leave all these in our past behind, and let us live in the net of Jesus' Gospel. You are in His net. You are in His boat, His Church. His words of grace are here for you. His forgiveness is always given to you here. Let's be the fish He has called us to be. Let's follow Him as His thankful Christians. Amen.