

**Matthew 4:12-25**

That last verse read: “And great crowds followed (Jesus) from Galilee, and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.” And some may be wondering, “Don’t those people have anything better to do than follow Jesus around day-in and day-out? Don’t they have jobs? Don’t they have yard work and homework to do? Don’t they have hobbies and other interests besides following behind Jesus from village to village?”

Perhaps even we wonder a bit at their “religious fervor.” I mean, we call ourselves “followers of Jesus,” but even we have to draw the line somewhere. It seems a bit much to walk behind Him day after day. Wouldn’t we be tempted to tell those crowds of people, “Hey, get a life! There are things in life besides walking with Jesus and listening to Him teach and preach from one place to another.”

But isn’t that pretty much the same thing people think about us? Our neighbors see us heading off to church week after week. They are probably aware of the fact that we spend time each day in God’s Word and in prayer. They know that we support the Lord’s work with our time and money. And perhaps they feel like telling us, “Get a life!”

Peter and Andrew, James and John had a life before they met Jesus. They were fishermen. Their life consisted of getting up while it was still dark, taking their boats out on the lake, dragging their nets through the water, and after selling any fish they caught, spending much of the remainder of the day mending any holes in their nets. That was their life B.C. (before Christ). And then Jesus called to them, “Follow Me.” And they left their nets and they followed Him.

Does it take a special kind of person to do that? Someone with an adventurous spirit? Someone willing to take risks? Peter was that kind of a person. He’d try anything once. He’d leap first and ask questions later. But what about Andrew, and James, and John, and all the other disciples of Jesus? No, the power was not in the man...it was in the Word. The power to follow Jesus does not come from within here; it comes from the words of Jesus. “You did not choose to follow Me,” Jesus says, “but I chose you.” It is His Word which draws His followers to Him like fish into a net.

It’s not as if Jesus was a worm on a hook and we just couldn’t resist His charm and attraction, and so we took the bait. We may be like fish in the water, but we didn’t take Him, rather He took us. He threw out the net of His Word and He brought us to Himself in Holy Baptism. And He keeps throwing out His net so that as His Word is preached and taught He keeps drawing us back to Him, because we fish like our freedom too much.

No fish enjoys being caught, and we’re no exception. We like swimming in the murky waters of lust and sinful pleasure. We’re glad to have the name “Christian,” but we’d like to keep that name without keeping all the commitments and responsibilities that come with it. We’re like the husband who is glad to be married, but who misses the freedom of his “bachelor days.” Before he had a spouse and before he had kids, all he had to worry about was himself. If he didn’t want to clean the house, he wouldn’t clean it. If he wanted to stay out late, he wouldn’t tell anyone—he would just do it. He had no one to answer to; no one to take care of except himself.

It's like Kramer told Seinfeld, "Marriage is a prison, Jerry. You watch TV, and she's there! You eat supper, and she's there!" And like some men blame their wives for "deceiving them into giving up their bachelorhood," so we are tempted to blame God for drawing us to Christ and to His Church when we really didn't want to lose our freedom in the first place.

But remember what God said in Eden? "It is not good for man to be alone." And so He brought Eve to Adam. And He puts us into families. And He brings us into His family, the Church, by the net of His Word. And I imagine that if a husband was griping about all the commitments and responsibilities of being tied to a spouse and family, she could tell him: "There's the door. If you want to leave, then leave!"

And so if any of us is not content with being a follower of Jesus, perhaps those same words are in order: "There's the door. No one is forcing you to be a Christian." And we know that every year thousands upon thousands of Christ's followers walk through that door, and many never come back. It was that way for Jesus, too. All the crowds that followed Him in Matthew 4 were not following Him in Matthew 24. They walked with Him for a time, but then they were drawn away from Him by Satan's net—the cares and pleasures of this world.

But you know, a complaining, ungrateful husband will stop his griping if his wife was to die. At that time he would realize how much he loved her. At that time he would realize how much she meant to him. He would realize why he had married her in the first place. And so Jesus, whom you and I often take for granted; Jesus, whom you and I often can take or leave (at least we act that way); Jesus dies on the cross. He dies, and so you now know how much He loves you. He dies, and so you know what you mean to Him.

Because God could well ask Himself, "Don't I have anything better to do than to lead around a bunch of no-good, ungrateful followers in Augusta, Missouri? Maybe I should 'get a life.'" And His answer is not only that He leads us, and loves to lead us, but that He dies for us out of love for us. He doesn't throw you out of the door; rather, He walks through the door into hell for you. He suffers the punishment that you and I deserve. He takes our abuse, and our griping, and our complaining, and He gives you only forgiveness in return.

Marriage is no prison when love and forgiveness are in that marriage, and following Christ, even with all the commitments and sacrifices that go with it, is heaven compared to life without Jesus. Jesus has a life, and it's centered around you. And even if we are not all that appreciative; even if you and I center our life around the cares of this world, Jesus' life remains centered around you—because we need His life, we need His love and forgiveness, we need His Word and Sacraments. That's why He never grows weary of coming here to His House week after week and, through His net, drawing you back to Him. He never tires of forgiving your sins. He never tires of giving Himself to you in bread and wine.

Jesus doesn't lead you because you and I are such good followers. He leads us because we're terrible at following Him. He loves you because we are unlovable. He forgives you because we are worthless sinners. Jesus didn't call Peter and Andrew, James and John because they were the best disciples in the world. He called them because, in mercy, He

would work in them and through them despite their sins and weaknesses. Jesus didn't draw us to Himself by the net of His Word because we are the best fish in the sea. We were the worst—the “chief of sinners” as Paul puts it. But in mercy, He gave you His name and His life—eternal life and the hope of glory.

And so will you follow Him...not just today, but everyday? You can walk out the door. You can leave Him if you want to. But He will never leave you nor forsake you. He doesn't love you because you follow Him; He loves you, and isn't that why you follow Him? He forgives you for all the times when you fail to follow Him. He forgives you for growing weary of Him.

There is no congregation on earth that Jesus loves to lead more than this little congregation in Augusta, Missouri. There is no one that He loves and forgives more than He loves and forgives you. You are His joy...His dear family...sinners for whom He died. And He leads you because the best is yet to come. And so let's follow Him, through life and through death, because His life and death, friend, is all for and about you. Amen.