

I bring you greetings this day, from Bishop Kevin Strickland and the Southeastern Synod Staff, as well as your siblings in Christ across Georgia, Tennessee, Mississippi and Alabama on this Third Sunday after the Epiphany. Today's Gospel is about Jesus' calling of his first four disciples from the Gospel of Mark in the First Chapter. It is about the first people who were called to hold the job which we hold today. Mark's story is not very elaborate. It is short and to the point – today we hear just 6 verses. There is a certain note of adventure as the four men leave their fishing business to go with Jesus, but there is not much in the story that seems terribly upsetting.

What the story doesn't tell about is what those men were getting in for by becoming followers of Jesus. To find out what was really in store for them, we have to keep reading. And what we discover is that being a disciple was not glamorous. In fact, it was downright dangerous.

Later in Mark we hear Jesus say, "Whoever loses his life for my sake and the sake of the gospel will find it." Matthew includes another comment from Jesus: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." Those are

disturbing statements, especially for those of us who are today's disciples.

He was saying that being his disciple is not an easy task. He was saying that the gospel is a disturbing force in the world which can upset individuals and nations alike. It brings change and new experiences to all who hear it. Being his disciple will not be easy because the task of the disciple is to be the bearer of this revolutionary gospel message and I think I need to be completely clear about what that revolutionary gospel message is, so we're not confused. Jesus calls us live out our discipleship by bearing this good news, the gospel to love one another, love the ones like us and to love the ones not like us. Jesus calls us to care for our neighbors – which means we care not only for them when they are in need but we also care about why they have a need. Calling us to remember that we are all a part of God's creation and God has called us to remember when one part of the body hurts, we all hurt. This gospel message is one that speaks out about apathy, racism, violence, inhumanity, and injustice. As someone once said "Those are fighting word".

We all know what happened to Jesus. His message disturbed

those in power and they tried to silence him. Of the four men in this gospel text, they were also executed for their witness. The powers that ruled the ancient world were upset by the gospel, and they tried to silence its voices. I'd like to be able to say that's all-ancient history, but there are still governments today, individuals today which oppose the gospel.

It is important for us to realize that the truth of the gospel is like a two-edge sword: it is both comforting and disturbing.

Jesus' two-edged sword also strikes close to home. I wonder what Peter's mother-in-law and wife had to say about his chasing off with an itinerant preacher. I wonder what old man Zebedee felt when his two sons simply picked up and left their half-mended nets in the boat. I suspect that the family relatives in this story were not too pleased. But that, too, is the nature of the gospel. It can upset individuals and disturb even family relationships. Jesus' call to service can be a call that provokes controversy and difficulty.

I think of a man named Hans Luther, Martin's father. He had dreams that his illustrious son's practice of law would be the means of pulling their family up from their humble origins. Hans probably had

dreams of his son standing before kings. And Martin did stand before kings – but it was as an outlaw, not as a champion.

Jesus points us to the reality that the gospel can be disturbing, both on a world-wide basis and as close as home and family. Why? The answer lies in the power of the gospel to change people’s lives. In the waters of our baptism, we are marked with the cross of Christ and sealed with the Holy Spirit and called to be disciples of Christ – we are changed! We are different people.

I suspect that many folks see the gospel through rose-colored glasses – wanting to see only the joy, comfort, and light – and not wanting to see the difficult or disruptive. “Behold, I will make all things new,” said Jesus. It is comforting because this gospel means that this radical love of God means that we are loved. That’s the other side of the two-edged sword.

But there are two important words in this morning’s gospel, one of which is the word repent. Too many people think “repent” means to feel sorry for what you’ve done – and then, go do it again. That’s not it at all. “Repent” means to change direction. It means a change in priorities. It means living with a whole new approach to life. While I do

feel that the church can serve as an anchor in a world where everything else is changing so rapidly, that is only one side of the gospel. The other side calls us to embrace the newness and change which Jesus brings.

The second key word is “believe”. That doesn’t mean listing your denomination as Lutheran on some application blank. It means trust and reliance and placing one’s whole life in God’s hands, regardless of what happens in life. It’s called “the leap of faith.” That’s the kind of change which the gospel produces. That’s what makes us different. There’s no turning back, because it’s a difference that won’t go away.

To be sure, we will always experience the power of sin in our daily lives. We may even go as far as renouncing the Christ who brought us to faith. Peter knew about that, for he was the one who denied he ever knew Jesus. But later he went out and wept bitterly. The change was there. He couldn't turn back. He was changed by the power of a gospel that left an indelible mark upon his soul.

Being a disciple is a real blessing, despite the gospel's two edges. We know that God has promised to be with us always. That means that we are never alone in life, no matter how we may feel at a given moment, or how unsettling life's changes may seem to be. Being a

disciple means that God is not just a "Sunday friend," but a "daily companion" in our life. It means that all things "do indeed work together for good." Oh -- it doesn't guarantee that we won't get sick or have to face unpleasant experiences. It does mean that as God's person, God will take the events of our life and turn them toward the good, even though we may not be able to see that good at the moment. Being a disciple also means that we will be part of the greatest change of all, the time when God will change this age into the age of eternity. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ stands at the center of our faith, because we know that our mortal nature will be changed into an immortal nature. And we shall be changed -- one final time.

The gospel is a great power. It does shake nations. It does disturb lives. It does change lives. But above all, it gives new life -- both for today and for eternity. However, because the gospel does change people, we sometimes are tempted to hide in its words of comfort rather than embrace the new life to which it calls us.

I recently came across another pastor's sermon title which I found intriguing. I want to leave its thought with you. "If you were arrested for being a Christian, would you be convicted?" We are today's

disciples, and it is not an easy task. Thankfully, our Lord gives us the strength to do the job which he has given us. The big question is: "What kind of disciple will we be?"