

Epiphany III,A

January 23, 2011

The Rev. John Van Sieten

This morning's gospel reading is wonderfully straight-forward and simple not only in the calling of the first disciples, but also in the nature of their task. According to the narrative, Jesus has made his way from his childhood home in Nazareth to Capernaum, a beautiful lake-side town on the north side of the Sea of Galilee. He continues to speak the message of John the Baptist, now in his own words: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." As they are fishing close into the shore of the lake, Jesus calls his first disciples, the brothers Peter and Andrew. All he says is, "Follow me." And then using a metaphor they will understand in terms of their vocation he says, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." This has to be the greatest understatement in all of the gospels. A little further along two more brothers are called, James and John. In these few short verses we are given the reason for the mission (repentance), we see Jesus gather those who will fulfill the mission and, finally, we are introduced into the incredibly simple carrying out of the mission: "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the

kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.” In these words, Jesus is almost saying to us this morning, “If YOU do this, you will be my disciples. This is what the church should be about in its mission of repentance: teaching, proclaiming the good news and healing and curing of disease.

As we look back over the past year on this Annual Meeting Sunday, I see that this simple, yet provocative, mission is being carried out among us. We are learning to proclaim the good news, not just to ourselves, but, more importantly to those around us who may not have known the love of Jesus. We are involved in new and wonderful ways about teaching this good news to all ages in a revitalized Sunday School, in Don Kraus’s excellent weekly Bible Studies and in Sunday morning Exploration and Discovery courses. We have also had a start to healing services, enough of a beginning to just scratch the surface and to allow us to know that as of now we have more questions than answers. I can’t tell you how much I respect the ministry that goes on here, how thrilled I am about the leadership, not only on the vestry, but in the pews and on a very cold day, how spectacular it is that when newcomers walk through our doors they receive such a warm greeting in a natural way.

Obviously the other issue on my mind and probably yours, too, is that I am saying goodbye to St. Giles' after this service. As I have reflected on this departure, which is also (I am quite sure) the end of my pastoral leadership in a parish, I've centered my reflections on just one thing I want to leave with you. "What is really important, " I've asked myself. Just one thing. From forty-one years of preaching, from thirty three years of being a priest (tomorrow is my ordination anniversary), what might be said as the curtain goes down.

By the grace of the Holy Spirit, this one thing is there in our gospel for today and it might be summed up in these words: "It's not about us." It is not about us, it is always about them. This is what I mean. When I look back over these years, I naturally set foot in my first parish as rector in Pittsburgh, PA. I remember two incidents which are telling. The first when it was all about me and the second when I discovered the reality of Christ-centered ministry in serving beyond self. Early on in my ministry in that parish, I had a disagreement with the Junior Warden, a former Roman Catholic. Before Lent that first year, Joe came to me to tell me that it was time to order the self-denial folders. Some of you probably don't know what

I'm talking about. Years ago these cardboard folders with slits for each day of Lent were popular. You put a quarter in the slit, filled it up and handed it in on Easter Sunday. Somehow this was meant to strengthen your spiritual life. Joe and I went round about it on this. He was young and headstrong and needed the last word and so did I. The absurdity of the folders equaled the absurd strain we put on our relationship as we fought and took away a whole lot from the mission of the church. Unfortunately it was all about us. The other tale has to do with a wonderful ecumenical food pantry we set up to meet the needs of the people in our part of the city. Like so much urban ministry it was challenging, tiring work that drained its leadership. One day I was talking to my Lutheran colleague, Ed Naumann, and complaining about how everyone was complaining to me. Ed listened and in the silence said, "Oh John, this just means that your ministry is just starting to take hold. It's only the beginning." How right he was. Ed helped me see in this remark that there will always be tiring challenge in serving others. There will also be joy and gratitude.

And so the one thing I want to leave with you as I walk through the doors for the last time as your priest in charge is this: Our ministry is not about us. The church can become incredibly self-absorbed and preoccupied

about the insignificant (25 cent self-denial folders). It is not about us. It is about them. It was about bringing people together in the Pioneer Food Coop so that not only would people come together to get fresh food at the cheapest prices, but they would discover each other and all that they had in common.

Jesus tells Peter and Andrew to drop their nets and their preoccupations and, instead, fish for people. As I've quoted the great Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, I do so again: "The church exists for those who are not her members." This is, I believe, the heart and soul of St. Giles'. It is this good news that is desperately needed in Jefferson and Whitefield and which so many of you have in your hearts. You need to do more to find ways to connect this to a mission beyond these walls. You need to probe your faith and ask God to remove the barriers to this mission which exists inside of you. You need, as a parish, to deal with the domestic, in house issues so that you can become girded for mission beyond. And when you do that, guess what will happen? People will flock here in droves. The word will get out. St. Giles' won't be lost in the pine trees, but will be on the minds of increasing numbers of people when they think about how they will spend their time on Sunday morning.

Jesus called for repentance—a turning in a new direction—he asked us to proclaim the Good News and he asked us to be aware of those who had need of healing and the curing of disease. What a wonderful mission to have. How great that this mission can be known in this place. Amen.