

God's Mended Love Net

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Matthew 4:12-23

[12] Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee.

[13] He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali,

[14] so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

[15] "Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles

[16] the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned."

[17] From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

[18] As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea--for they were fishermen.

[19] And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."

[20] Immediately they left their nets and followed him.

[21] As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them.

[22] Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

[23] 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.

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Grace to you, and peace, from God Our Father and Our Lord and Savior Jesus The Christ!

What I have to say this morning is very simple: Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church to accomplish the mission Our Lord has for you, which is to tell others of his saving, redeeming love so as to invite them to receive it, to accomplish this mission, you as a congregation need to come together and be unified. You heard today's Second Lesson. Negatively put, divisions must cease. Positively put, from today's Gospel, the net can be mended.

Is that possible? I'm not sure. I pray that it is. I am leaving and won't be around to help accomplish it. Pastor Zach is coming and he alone won't be able to magically bring it about. I don't believe any one thing or person or Pastor, is the reason for the disunity.

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Disunity and wrangling in Hill Avenue Grace is nothing unique. It is going on everywhere. In our nation, in our government, in our schools, in our national church bodies, you name the forum or institution or issue, people are divided and going at each other.

A young rabbi found a serious problem in his new congregation. During the Friday service, half the congregation stood for the prayers and half remained seated, and each side shouted at the other, insisting that theirs was the true tradition. Nothing the rabbi said or did moved toward solving the impasse. Finally, in desperation, the young rabbi sought out the synagogue's 99-year-old founder. He met the old rabbi in the nursing home and poured out his troubles. "So tell me," he pleaded, "Was it the tradition for the congregation to stand during the prayers?" "No," answered the old rabbi. "Ah," responded the younger man, "Then it was the tradition to sit during the prayers?" "No," answered the old rabbi. "Well," the young rabbi responded, "What we have is complete chaos! Half the people stand and shout and the other half sit and scream." "Ah," said the old man, "*That* was the tradition."

When two or more are gathered, factions lurk in the midst of them!

In today's Second Lesson, the Apostle Paul is writing to the Church at Corinth, a church he had organized:

[10] Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.

[11] For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters.

[12] What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ."

[13] Has Christ been divided?¹

When St. Paul implores the people at Corinth to "be united", he uses the same Greek word, *katartizo*, that Matthew uses when, in today's Gospel, he describes James and John, the sons of Zebedee, as "mending" their nets.

Today's Second Lesson and Gospel are put together to tell us that the "mending" of the divisions or schisms within the church is necessary for the church to effectively carry out its purpose - the purpose being to throw out God's great net for drawing all people into his love - captured in the phrase, "... I will make you fish for people."

¹ 1 Corinthians 1:10-13a

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The net has to be mended! Having holes in the net will not allow us to achieve the mission God has for us.

So, how do we pull this thing off? If we could do it ourselves, wouldn't we have already done it? Or is it a case of mending one hole only to discover another one develop? Are we dealing with Sin?

I believe and proclaim to you as the Word of The Lord that our unity as Christians, in Hill Avenue Grace, and in the Church of Christ throughout the world, is only achieved when we grow up – mature - in Christ. And not everyone grows and matures at the same pace. And some go through long periods when they do not grow. And some resist growing.

Maturing in Christ is the key to achieving unity. Unity is the key to effectively cast the Gospel net “to catch” people for God. Maturing spiritually in Christ has to occur before any congregation will grow in numbers. Having a reputation as a congregation for wrangling, division, discord, etc., will guarantee that growth is stunted.

How, then, does one mature in Christ? The writer of the letter to the Church at Ephesus put it this way:

Ephesians 4

[1] I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called,

[2] with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love,

[3] eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

[4] There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call,

[5] one Lord, one faith, one baptism,

[6] one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all.

[7] But grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.

[8] Therefore it is said, "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men."

[9] (In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth?

[10] He who descended is he who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)

[11] And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers,

[12] to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,

[13] until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ;

[14] so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles.

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- [15] Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,
- [16] from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love.
- [17] Now this I affirm and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds;
- [18] they are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart;
- [19] they have become callous and have given themselves up to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of uncleanness.
- [20] You did not so learn Christ! –
- [21] assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus.
- [22] Put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts,
- [23] and be renewed in the spirit of your minds,
- [24] and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.
- [25] Therefore, putting away falsehood, let everyone speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.
- [26] Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger,
- [27] and give no opportunity to the devil.
- [28] Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his hands, so that he may be able to give to those in need.
- [29] Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for edifying, as fits the occasion, that it may impart grace to those who hear.
- [30] And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, in whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.
- [31] Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice,
- [32] and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

To achieve this kind of spiritual maturity, the heart must surrender to Christ. The will must surrender to Christ. And for these things to occur, one must do as Jesus Our Lord commands in today's Gospel at the beginning of his ministry, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand."

Repentance is change. And many people, me included, do not like change and resist it. We like to hold on to the old ways and sing of the good old days.

I read a story this week that fascinated me. Its opening sentence read:
"Scientists say they have discovered a shape-changing fish that can detect the presence of hungry

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predators and then turn itself from easy pickings into something much more difficult to swallow.”²

This fish changes in order to survive. The Gospel today invites us to change so that we may become in this place God’s Mended Love Net. Then, and only then, will we be effective in catching people for Christ. And beyond that, and far less in importance, in growing in numbers.

Pray this Sunday of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, that the necessary changes in our hearts will proceed forthwith. In Hill Avenue Grace, for sure. But also in Christ’s bigger net. God will answer our prayers affirmatively. But first we have to pray them and be sincere in asking and resolute in repenting.

I have tried during the time I have been with you to get you to relax and to accept each other as you are, recognizing each other’s uniqueness as a beloved child of God, appreciating each other’s generational difference and needs from your own, recognizing that each of you is highly educated, relatively well-to-do, tending to be strong willed, particular, not afraid to assert yourself and believing secretly that if they would just do it my way, everything would be just right. Not all are like this, but many are. And in a congregation with many like this, you resemble Jesus’ first disciples. You are not, as were the first disciples at first, just doing your own thing, your way. You are, as were the first disciples, called by Our Lord, “Follow me!”

I know you are, individually and as a congregation, trying to answer that call. And you have been doing so for over 100 years now. But you have to recognize that the challenge to follow that call is greater now, both as an individual and as a congregation. We live in a very dysfunctional and troubled and divided world. The call now to be a disciple of Jesus is very hard to hear and obey.

When you come to church and interact with each other in this church, you bring with you a lot of the ways of the dysfunctional, troubled and divided world. That makes following Our Lord a very challenging thing to do.

The analogy of a group of fishermen trying to catch fish with a net with holes in it is very appropo. The net has to be mended. Your personal net and your congregational net.

Yes, you have a great history as a congregation. You have followed Our Lord, not perfectly, of course, but quite well, for a long time. Hill Avenue Grace’s net has seen a lot of action. You don’t need a new net. It is God’s net, entrusted to you. Your job is to take care of the net and mend it, when it needs mending.

Pastor Zach will help you, but he can’t do it alone.

² New York Times 1/19/93

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What if you have a net-mending year? 2020 is a year and it is also perfect vision. See the holes in the net and repair them. And remember, it is a working net. You have to continue fishing, for sure, but you have to take time and effort to do mending.

Recognize, as you do the mending, that there are different ways to do the mending. Yours isn't the only way.

Recognize that you may need to mend your own net – that is, your attitude, your words, your use of your time and talents and treasures – before you can be effective in mending Hill Avenue Grace's congregational net.

Recognize that each individual person in this congregation is unique, just as no two snow flakes are identical. Each uniqueness is loved and forgiven and accepted and called by our Lord. Recognize that, when our Lord calls us to follow him, the ways of our present dysfunctional, troubled and divided society will have to be discarded. We give up grudges. We don't come in here with bones to pick. We give up thinking and behaving as if our way is the only way.

Now, I have said enough. You get the picture.

Our Lord continues to call you as individuals and as a congregation to follow him, HIM, and to fish for people. You are to mend the net. It will be for God "God's Mended Love Net."

Amen.

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