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Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany, Year A

Matthew 4:12-25

Let us pray. Grant us, O God to hear your voice, and in hearing your voice to love your word, and in loving your word to do your will, through Christ our Lord. Amen



Last Sunday our gospel reading helped us see how our faith is formed through respectful relationships, guided learning, spiritual practices and faith-filled service. Over the next four weeks the gospel readings will help us highlight one of each of these components of faith formation.

Today we'll start with respectful relationships because each of the other practices are done within the relationships we hold with others, and especially with God.

Before we head into our gospel text for today, I'd like you to think about the people and the settings that have been the most important to the formation of your faith in Jesus Christ.

For me, those who come to mind include my parents and grandparents who served their congregations faithfully for many years. My mom is still the church choir director and coordinator of funeral receptions and any other social gathering.

There are several adults from the congregation I grew up in whose lives were models of faithfulness for me. We had an active youth group and the youth gatherings and retreats we went to together were exciting and important to my awareness of how Jesus drew us together for fun and worship and learning.

I think about a prayer group I belonged to in high school. We thought of ourselves as Holy Rollers. I experienced a much more passionate expression of faith with this group than in my Lutheran congregation, and in that setting that was OK.

As I grew to be an adult, I have had friends who spoke God's words of comfort and encouragement to me.

I traveled to Russia in the early 200's with a group from my church in Washington to visit our sister congregation, I saw how the Christians there had been persecuted during the Cold War, and many of them—including Lutherans—worshiped secretly. Their dedication to reclaiming their church buildings and rejoicing in the ability to worship openly again was inspiring.

And when we lived in SE Alaska, I was pleased to be welcomed warmly into the ministerial group of pastors from several other Christian denominations.

You have your own stories and relationships in which your faith was born and nurtured throughout your life. This morning I will pause from time to time to give you a chance to think about those relationships more specifically.

Confirmation youth, I'd like you to write down the different kinds of relationships you hear in the sermon today. Then choose a couple of them and list the specific people or settings where you have those kinds of faith relationships in your life.

Let's see how God was at work to form faith through the relationships in our gospel reading.

At the beginning of the reading we are reminded of Jesus' relationship to John the Baptist. John had been preaching a message of repentance and baptizing those who were seeking righteousness with God. Matthew does not say that Jesus and John were cousins, as Luke's gospel does, but they shared a common mission which Jesus picks up from John when he proclaims, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

Can you think of someone who served as a kind of faith mentor for you? *Pause*

Matthew next outlines Jesus' travels, which I hope you recognized as an echo of what was read from our Isaiah reading today. Matthew is intentional about connecting Jesus to the people and prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament. This is an important relationship for faith formation, too.

These stories tell how God was faithful to the promises made to Israel, especially in Jesus. As Lutherans we also tell the stories of the 16<sup>th</sup> century reformers, like Martin Luther, as God guided the church back to the central focus of Scripture through them. These old stories help us recognize how God is present and active in our own lives.

How has your relationship with God's Word and the history of the church been formed? Which stories and people in the Bible are important to you? *pause*

Let's move to the second half of the gospel reading today.

Jesus comes to two sets of brothers who are all fishermen. When Simon Peter and Andrew were called by Jesus to follow him, they went together. Siblings and other close family or friends are so important to our lives of faith. What a blessing to have people we care about and who care for us so deeply as we journey through life!

Maybe you can think of a relationship like these brothers that has been a source of faith formation for you. Are there any close friends or siblings for whom you could be a more intentional faith companion? *Pause*

The next set of brothers Jesus calls to follow him are called from their boat where they were fishing with their father. I wonder how Zebedee felt when James and John left him to follow Jesus. Was he angry that they were following some crazy preacher to who-knows-where to do who-knows-what?

Or was Zebedee like so many others who recognized the light of God the moment they met Jesus? What if Zebedee had been preparing his sons for the coming of God's Messiah throughout their lives? What if he blessed his sons before they left to follow Jesus and fish for people to gather into the kingdom of heaven?

Who are the children in your life with whom you could share your faith? How might you tell them about what Jesus means to you—maybe in writing or in personal conversations? How might you encourage them to follow Christ? *Pause*

Next, we're told, "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues..." Jesus had a respectful relationship with his culture. The Jewish people were his people. Matthew lays out Jesus' ancestry from Abraham to Joseph and Mary at the beginning of this gospel. What has your culture taught you about faith in Christ? *Pause*

With his new disciples Jesus sets out to heal the sick. He enters into relationship with the most broken and desperate people. Diseases, pain, and afflictions like leprosy, paralysis, and whatever being possessed by demons was back then, all of those conditions kept people from

being in relationship with the world. They would have been isolated, and if they didn't have a family to care for them, they were likely quite poor.

These are the people who Jesus healed in body, mind, and spirit. What a story they had to tell about God's power and grace in their lives!

There are dozens of books and movies about miraculous healings or of people who overcame a great adversity and saw God at work in and around them through it all. Do you have a story of a time Christ ministered to you when you were in need of care? When has Christ brought you into relationship with someone who was desperate for a friend or someone to care for them?

*Pause*

"And great crowds followed [Jesus] from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan." We don't grow in faith only by the relationships closest to us. Jesus travelled, crossing borders and boundaries—both physical and cultural. The church of Christ-followers has moved out into all the world, just as Jesus told his disciples to do after his resurrection.

This past week was the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. We need to be in respectful relationships with Christians of every denomination, to demonstrate the unity God intends for us. What have you learned from other expressions of the Christian church that has formed your faith? *Pause*

A life of faith is a life that is formed by the faith we share within the respectful relationships around us. Jesus did not accomplish his ministry alone. He relied on the foundation of faith from his ancestors. He had parents and a community who did their best to live their faithful witness.

At his baptism he was empowered by the Holy Spirit and named and claimed by God the Father as God's Beloved Son. And throughout his ministry he invited others to come along with him, to learn from him, to pray and worship with him, and to serve the deepest needs in the world together.

What are the relationships that have nurtured your faith? Who are the ones you might share your faith with—in conversation or by inviting them to join you as you live out your callings?  
*pause*

Let us pray.

Gracious and holy God, you have created us to be in respectful relationships with one another. In our families, our friendships, and your whole church on earth, give us diligence to seek you, wisdom to perceive you, and patience to wait for you.

Grant us, O God, a mind to meditate on you; eyes to behold you; ears to listen for your word; a heart to love you; and a life to proclaim you; through the power of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. **Amen.**

## **Prayers of Intercession**

Called together through water and the Word, we boldly pray for the church, the world, and all who long to hear God's voice.

*A brief silence.*

Holy One, your voice calls us to follow. Thank you for the Christian church of every time and place, especially those who create communities of grace today. Open our hearts to serve you alongside our sisters and brothers near and far. Lord, in your mercy,  
**hear our prayer.**

Maker of all, we grieve the destruction caused by the wildfires in Australia. We grieve the loss of life of vegetation, animals, and especially the firefighters who died trying to fight back the flames. Bring peace and comfort to those who have lost those they love, and send rain and cooler temperatures to bring an end to this disaster. Lord, in your mercy,  
**hear our prayer.**

Ruler of all, thank you for those who run for local and national office, and all who serve as elected leaders. Gather wise and courageous voices together, that your mercy and justice would dawn upon all people and nations. We pray especially for the U.S. Senate this week, as they work for the good of all. Lord, in your mercy,  
**hear our prayer.**

Healer of all, thank you for people and places who provide care and safety for those who cannot care for themselves. Uplift all who live in fear, pain, or isolation. Grant healing and wholeness to all who are sick, lonely, or grieving especially...

Kathie, Jessie, Kyle, Rodney, Delores, Loyd, and Ed.

Lord, in your mercy,

**hear our prayer.**

Risen Lord, we marvel at the meaning of your resurrection. Give us faith to place all hope in you as we give thanks for the faithful departed, those we have loved and those from generations past. May their witness help us follow your call. Lord, in your mercy,  
**hear our prayer.**

We place our prayers before you, God, united in your Spirit; through your beloved Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**