

Pastor Troy E. Medlin  
3 Epiphany, Year B  
Grace, River Forest  
1/21/24

*Out of the Boat and Into Life*

If you have spent any time in or around Grace here you have heard the sound of the bells. They chime every hour during the day and on Sundays they ring about 10 minutes before worship begins. I have heard some of you talk about how meaningful it is when you can hear the sound of the bells from your home or in your neighborhood. For some of you, maybe they literally *call* you to worship, reminding you it is time to walk or drive over.

Liturgical scholar Gordon Lathrop often talks about the bell at West Denmark Lutheran Church in Wisconsin. Inscribed on the bell is the phrase “to the bath, to the table, to the prayers, and the word I call every seeking soul.” Our bells proclaim the same to us and all within their reverberations. Gather on Sunday mornings, around the real presence of our broken bodies and receive Jesus Christ given for you.

The bells call us out of our isolation and individualism, our work and toil, expectations and schedules and our own worlds and into the gift of a community to be with each other in this place.

The good news of God was not only proclaimed but enfleshed before them. This one who passed by the sea of Galilee was and is the kingdom of God come near to them and to us. What does the kingdom of God look like? “Exactly like the carpenter's son from Nazareth. And his cross and resurrection, dying and rising”

He finds them and speaks their names. Simon, Andrew, James and John while they are in their boats and mending their nets. Jesus says to them "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." Immediately, they drop their nets and follow. It is like the voice of Jesus resounds like a bell calling them out and into lasting life-- something new.

How about you? What are those nets? The ones you carry that just seem to weigh you down more and more. It is like we constantly mend them but have nothing to show for it. They keep tearing. How about those boats that you feel stuck in? Inside their narrow confines they almost feel like a tomb. It is hard to imagine a future beyond them. For me, often it is my own unrealistic expectations I place on myself. Or my inner critic that whispers I'm not good enough, or the voices of this world that tell me I am only what I do and can accomplish, and that efficiency and busyness are the creeds I should orient my life around. Or that I'm only useful

when I have a certain set of skills or knowledge or can contribute in a particular way. That's exhausting.

In baptism he calls you by name. He speaks to you: "beloved drop your nets and step out of the boat." "Beloved: come out of your tombs." "Step out of those boats you thought would hold you captive forever." You have already died! The one who speaks these words to you is the one who brings life out of every death. Even the ones that seem so final. Christ knows what he is talking about. You have been forever connected to Jesus Christ the risen one. You belong to him. The Spirit lives in you and nothing can ever separate you from this God's love. Nothing. Your worth and value and usefulness and place in this community comes from the triune God and their outlandish and overflowing mercy and grace and no one and nothing else.

Like a bell tolling across the generations calling the faithful to reverent attention the reign of God addresses you this morning. Sit up. Listen. He calls you by name and says: "follow me and I will make you fish for people." Follow me and use what you have to bear witness to this kingdom.

As St. Paul says "the present form of this world is passing away." Loosen the grip on your life and things and reputation. Let go of your self obsession. Drop your need to prove or defend yourself. There is a tomorrow beyond. Take a risk in your relationships and in your neighborhood. Reach out with love. Maybe a love that gives or a love that receives. A love that is curious. A love that shares. Or Invites. Or speaks of this God's love made known in Christ in public. That's risky. Yet we are called.

As told by crossings, "The year was 1974. On the evening of January 20 (50 years ago last night), bells began tolling on the campus of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, the premier theological institution of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Students streamed to the seminary chapel. There they learned that the school's Board of Control had just suspended the Rev. Dr. John H. Tietjen from his office as seminary president. A month later Seminex was born."

This was a fracture/rupture/bold action that has shaped Lutheranism since.

Seminex embodied faithfulness in the midst of risk and loss. A group of pastors, professors, students, others, stepping out of the boat of safety and venturing into the unknown. Eventually following Jesus out of that chapel. There will be events here at Grace later this spring to commemorate 50 years since seminex began. And Grace- that is an integral part of our story. A story that in some ways is still unfolding now as we discern where the gospel of Jesus Christ is calling us in 2024 and what risks might be involved.

Those bells that ring and call us into this place: they also call us out. Like the words of one prayer: O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us- and your voice inviting us: "follow me."