

January 15, 2017

The Great Invitation - Come and See



Last week, we began our series, "The Great Invitation" as we celebrated the Baptism of our Lord. We heard how Jesus accepted his call to ministry, as he entered those baptismal waters, and we explored how our baptisms are not only a means of grace in that one moment of sprinkling, but a vocational call that is lived out our whole lives long. Over the next six-weeks, we will hear as Jesus calls and teaches his disciples. This is a series about basic foundations, both about how people "get to" Jesus in the first place, and then how he teaches them (and us) about the radically different nature of life in God's kingdom that has drawn near. We will be examining why we decided to say yes to following Jesus, reflecting on our own personal faith story, and practicing how to tell it.

In today's lesson from John's Gospel, we hear a series of testimonies about who Jesus is and how his earliest disciples came to follow him. First, we hear a testimony from John the Baptist. John has been baptizing people in Bethany across the Jordan. Some folks had come down from Jerusalem to see who he was and what he was doing. When they asked him who he was, he replied that he was not a prophet and not the Messiah, but he was sent to announce the coming of the Messiah. He said that he baptized with water, but the one who was coming was much more powerful than he.

The next day, the crowd gathered again. When Jesus comes among them, John begins to further identify who Jesus is. He says Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He says he is the one who ranks ahead of him. He tells how he saw a Spirit descending from heaven like a dove and alighting on Jesus. He says the one who sent him to announce the coming of Jesus spoke directly to him and said, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptized with the Holy Spirit."

So John has a lot to say in his testimony. He has deep reasons, personal reasons, for calling Jesus the Messiah. Perhaps some of you identify with John's testimony. Maybe you have seen or experienced something that personally confirmed for you that Jesus is the LORD. Maybe you heard a voice, or witnessed a miracle, felt your heart strangely warmed by the grace of God, or had a "come to Jesus moment" where your life was changed through faith. These experiences, while they're great for you, are not meant to be kept to yourself, but shared with others. You see, most people do not have their first encounter with Christ in this experiential way... Most, come to faith by others referring them to Christ first. Some may have stories of a direct encounter with Jesus apart from anyone else pointing to him first, but I would guess that most of us got to Jesus because someone else, someone we trusted, told us about him. Maybe it was a parent, or a teacher, a camp counselor, or a pastor... but someone else shared with you their passion for Christ and his teachings, encouraging you to follow too.

And that's exactly what we see played out in the second part of our scripture today. John the Baptist is standing with a couple members of his own community, and they see Jesus walking by. John points to Jesus and tells his friends, "Hey, I want you to look at that man. He is the Lamb of God." Upon hearing this, the two friends turn and follow

after Jesus. Let's think about that. I imagine that since the gospel writer calls these two friends of John the Baptist "his disciples" that John must have earned their trust. Perhaps you can identify with this story from the point of view of friendship. Maybe it is easier to share our personal beliefs with those we have a relationship of trust with. Maybe it's easier for some to hear a story of testimony from a friend, someone they know has their best interests at heart.

As I reflect on my spiritual journey and who taught me about Jesus, I think first of my parents, particularly of my mom – who also happens to be a pastor. I grew up in the church hearing my mom preach every Sunday, going to Sunday school to learn about the Bible stories, and about forgiveness and faith. I knew all the words to the VBS songs and many hymns... but in some ways, I was simply going through the motions. It wasn't until I went to summer camp one year and had a transformational experience during one evening conversation on the beach. Honestly, I couldn't tell you exactly what we talked about, but one of our counselors sat and shared with us his faith story and encouraged us to see how God was working in our own lives, and was calling us to serve. I came home from camp that summer and told my mom I was going to seminary to be a pastor... I was in junior high... so needless to say, she encouraged me to finish school first and make sure that was really what I wanted to do... but the seeds had been planted. This faith stuff wasn't just my mom's thing... it was mine too. God was calling ME to do amazing things with my life. And God's call is the same for you – not necessarily to be a pastor, but God is calling you to use your gifts and unique talents to share love, to share grace, and to be a kingdom builder.

Our Gospel story continues with Jesus turning around and spotting John's disciples following after him. Jesus asks them what they are looking for. They don't answer directly. I wonder if they don't really know themselves... Instead, they call him "teacher" and ask him where he is staying. Maybe calling him "Rabbi" is an answer, but I think the more interesting development is that they ask him where he is staying, and he invites them to "come and see." It is an interesting turn of events, because it seems like it is during this extended time in the presence of Jesus that they really become his followers. Here we see an investment in relationship first, before the men decide to follow Jesus, which is different than the call story we'll read next week.

This scripture holds so much great insight for us as we look more closely at our own entry point into faith, and how we encourage others to join us along the journey. We are reminded that unless we share our own experiences of faith, there are some that might never hear about the amazing journey of grace that is unfolding before us. The scripture also gives us hints through Jesus' example of how to welcome seekers, how to create a space of hospitality for those who are coming to Christ for the first time, or are first time visitors to our faith community.

When the people in today's story were referred to Jesus by others, Jesus did two things. First, he asked them what they were seeking. When we invite others to Christ, and they actually express some interest, do we ask this question? Do we ask what they are seeking, or do we presume we know? Or do we presume that whatever they are seeking, we already know the answer? Jesus didn't do that with those who came to him by referral. He asked them what they were seeking. How do we ask folks we refer to

Jesus what they are seeking? Their answer reveals their motives. Jesus cared about their motives. Jesus cared about the particular "why" that led them to come to him in the first place.

"Where are you staying?" they ask. This question is bigger than something like, "We'd like to see your house," though it has some of that as well. It is more like, "We're interested in the possibility of joining up with you and living with you. Can we check that out?" Jesus responds simply, "Come and see." He didn't say "I live over there"... "If you're headed down Broad toward the center of town, we're on your right". He also didn't say, "Sign up for the rest of your lives here, on the spot," as some revivalists might do. Instead he said, "Come and see." "Come" points to Jesus actually taking them there and spending time with them to get to know them and for them to get to know him. "See" indicates Jesus intended to open their eyes and to make room for them to make their own decision about their next steps. They might come and stay after what Jesus would show them. They might not. Sometimes people need a little time. Sometimes people need a LOT of time! We need to be patient with people and give them the time and space they need. There's no hurry. Jesus invites us to take all the time we need.

SO - no matter who you are... no matter where you are along life's journey... faith's journey... there is a place for you. Christ is reaching out for you to come and see. Maybe through a direct communication, or maybe through other people, especially his followers. And maybe, my friends, we are needed to be the one's extending that invitation to someone else. Maybe it is through us that others will be able to learn about, and experience the love of God. In our seeking and in our finding, in our experiencing and in our sharing, may God's love fill, inspire, and use us all to do great things to build up the Kingdom of God, here and now. Amen.