

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson

2nd Sunday after Epiphany Year A
January 15, 2017

“What are you looking for?” It’s a great question which Jesus poses to John’s followers in today’s gospel. This question can be alternatively translated “What are you seeking?” or “What are you after?”. The question is brilliant because it calls the seeker to do a quick interior discovery of what is burning in their hearts that causes them to turn to Jesus. Is it curiosity, intrigue, shame, fear, guilt, loneliness, joy, generosity or desire for relationship? Are they wanting comfort or challenge, respite from a weary world, safety, unconditional love or deeper union with the force of goodness; or do they want to feel the loving presence descend upon them as the dove in Jesus’ baptism and wash away their sins? Jesus wants to know where this relationship is beginning; Jesus wants to know where to meet each one, and asks the question, “What are you after?” I imagine if we were each to try to answer that question, “What are you seeking in Jesus and or in this church?” we would arrive at a multitude of responses and to do so would be exactly right. For as Jesus engaged John’s followers and as he engages us with that question, his gift to us is that he is inviting us into a relationship, which is the source of all that we could be seeking, now or forever.

John’s disciples respond to Jesus’ abrupt question with only one word: Rabbi. They are looking for a wise one who will teach them the way of God. And then, Jesus says, “Come and see”. In that simple sentence, Jesus lays out exactly the relationship he desires with us, one that is for us what we seek and more, and one which can result in our discipleship and witness to Jesus’ truth in our world.

With the words “Come and see”, Jesus extends the invitation to each of us, and says: follow me, listen to me, sit with me, spend time with me, question, challenge, dream, allow your heart to be lifted by me, help me be for you, what you need from me, and then let’s see where our relationship goes. Jesus knows that trust needs to be built and to become the foundation of our relationship with the holy.

We don’t know what John’s followers and Jesus said to each other that afternoon, but we do know it resulted in the followers leaving as Jesus’ disciples, ready to share with the world the truth of Jesus.

With the words, “Come and see”, Jesus invites us to become his disciples. We each hear these words of Jesus’ invitation from different vantage points, different circumstances, moments, or differing experiences: some within the church, some in solitude, some in intimate relationships, some through strangers, some through music, some in the stillness and beauty of nature, and some who may have heard the invitation of Jesus to “come and see” on a busy street corner in NYC. How it happens doesn’t matter, but the “why” does. It happens to each of us because this invitation of Jesus resonates with the yearning set within our hearts by God for God.

Maybe you can't remember the time when you heard this invitation, or a time when you heard it but had been turned away for whatever reason by the church, or ridiculed, or you weren't able to recognize it for what it was. Sadly, this happens and we miss out on a directing and guiding force in our lives. If this is your story, I invite you to come and talk with me, so I can help you open the doors to Jesus' invitation.

One way of looking at our hearing and responding to Jesus' invitation to "Come and see" is to look at the moments in our lives when suddenly we were compelled to pray, or drawn to walk deeper into the woods, or find our source of energy and enthusiasm in this gathering on Sunday mornings. Often we see it as a movement from barely caring about church and attending only when there's nothing else to do, to a time when we would sorely miss our engagement with each other and Christ, when something unexpected comes up and we can't be here on a Sunday. Ultimately, if we hear and respond to Jesus' invitation, we will find we end up living and moving and having our being in Christ, in a way that is surely shocking to us. This is all because we've had spiritual friends, companions, mentors, and teachers who have spoken Jesus' invitation to us' "Come and see", and we find have gone more deeply into that spiritual place of union with Christ.

I often imagine the overriding work of our parish as offering this invitation, to "Come and see" to all those around us. For that's what Jesus did, and as Jesus' disciples we are called to do that as well. Jesus travelled about inviting people into something new and true, sitting with them over meals; sharing his passion about righting the wrongs of an oppressive society; showing people a new way to look at others through his love; walking together; praying together, encouraging people to name what they are after (as when he asked the man with the paralyzed hand whether he wanted to be made well-being the companion on the Way; offering insight; and drawing people into what he knew to be the truth. It is my dream that we do this too: that we can say to others, come and see, listen to us as we listen to you, sit with us, share a meal with us, feel our loving presence, challenge us, inspire us, dream with us, and let us be what you need from us, and we'll see where the relationship goes. It is my dream that when we open our red doors for worship on Sunday or our side doors for meals on Monday, people will come and see, for what we have to offer is of God and it is good. It is my dream that people will see the ways we offer ourselves to God, through our money, energy, and commitment to Jesus' work in our neighborhood, and know that there is something true going on here which calls this level of dedication to God from within us, and that they will know they are invited into it also, into this relationship with Jesus that nourishes and calls us into discipleship. Sometimes, in fact often, discipleship involves sacrifice on our part, sacrifice that we may willingly or not so willingly offer: sacrifice of our previously held ideas, or sacrifices of the previously held plans for the rest of our lives; sacrifice our complacency of the status quo when the ways of the world oppress other people; sacrifice our resources as we commit ourselves to something larger than our own needs; sacrifice our heart, as we offer praise and thanksgiving to God.

Just before Jesus' question was posed to John's followers, they heard John the Baptist declare Jesus as the Lamb of God, which naturally conveyed to them the idea of sacrifice, since the phrase could easily have been interpreted as an allusion to the sacrificial Passover lamb which

brought deliverance to their ancient Hebrew ancestors, or to the sacrificial lamb that appeared when Abraham was ready to sacrifice his son Isaac. So, it's helpful to understand how we think about sacrifice today. Each Sunday, in our Eucharistic prayer, after I break the bread, symbolizing Jesus' broken body, I say the words, "Alleluia, Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us. Therefore, let us keep the feast. Alleluia.

What does that word sacrifice mean to you? Many of us will attach to St. Anselm's theory of atonement in our explanation, that Jesus was sacrificed and substituted for our sins, and some may believe that we no longer have to worry about our sinfulness because Jesus paid the price for all of us. But Anselm's theory of sacrifice only came into being at the start of the 2nd millennium. The hearers of that phrase of John would have known sacrifice to be something that established, maintained, strengthened or restored a relationship, either with each other or with God. The one offering a sacrifice was giving a gift to someone else, not as a substitute or a payment for their sinfulness, but an offering which was intended to strengthen a relationship, to make something sacred, or to bring the holy into the relationship. So, as Jesus is proclaimed as the Lamb of God in our gospel story today, it is saying to us that Jesus, is offered to us by God, as a way to make our lives holy, as a way to strengthen our relationship with God, as a way to restore all of humankind and creation with our Creator.

Jesus- coming to us, as God's gift, as God's offering to make our lives holy. And in Jesus' invitation to us to "Come and see", we are invited into that holiness. And our response to God's gift is that we in turn, through our sacrifice to God and to this parish, offer ourselves back to God, acknowledging and doing our part to live into the relationship Jesus wants for us. I imagine it was easier for the Jews of Jesus' time to understand the reality of their sacrifice as strengthening their relationship with God, for they went out into the fields and chose the unblemished lamb for sacrifice, knowing this beautiful animal represented their offering the best of what they have to the God they knelt on their knees to worship. The offering was tangible and real to them. They left the temple knowing that all that they had and all that they were, they would gladly give to the God of mercy, whose love they craved in their lives. It's not quite so easy for us to see the direct relationship between what we give God, through our parish support, and the restoration of our relationship with God, but it is just as true for us as it was for the Jewish people who heard Jesus' invitation. Our giving to each other and to the ministry of our parish is a way we tend to the most profound relationship in our lives, that which is life-giving beyond comparison, that which offers us our salvation.

Come and see. We never know where and when that invitation will come to life for us. We never know the depths of response it will call from us. We never know how we will transmit that voice of Jesus' invitation to others. But It's a powerful invitation. Let us dedicate our lives to hearing it, passing it along to others, and responding with a generosity which fills our souls with gladness.

Amen.