

INVITING PEOPLE TO CHURCH

John 1:35-51

A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on January 20, 2008 the Second Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

Focus Text

The next day John [the Baptist] again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!"

The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter).

On March 23 of this year, we will celebrate Easter. I am told this is as Easter ever appears. This means Lent is just around the corner, with Ash Wednesday coming on February 6th. It also means there are only two Sundays in Ordinary Time between Epiphany and Transfiguration, today and next Sunday.

These two Sundays have terrific texts, both about initial disciples who accept Jesus' call shortly after his baptism. I plan to preach from each of these texts and focus on some basic aspects of what it means to be a Christian. Next week I will preach on "Leaving Something Behind"; this week on inviting others to experience what we have experienced.

Let us pray: *Lord God: As Jesus invited Andrew to "come and see," as Philip invited Nathanael to "come and see," give me the power in preaching today to lead us to invite others to "come and see." In the name of the One who calls us, even Jesus Christ. Amen.*

One of the hallmarks of the Presbyterian Church is our commitment to individual conscience. Written into our constitution as Presbyterians is the affirmation: "God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of [people] which are in anything contrary to [God's] Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship."

Equally strong is our commitment to privacy. Again, our constitution reads: "We consider the rights of private judgment in all matters that respect religion, as universal and unalienable."

Also embedded in our Presbyterian Constitution is the idea that each of us may come to different ideas concerning truth. "There are truths and forms with respect to which [people] of good characters and principles may differ."¹

Individual conscience. Privacy. Difference.

These are crucial ways Presbyterians understand the way we are to live as disciples of Jesus Christ, led by the Spirit, in the world God created. These ideas are as ingrained in us as the cut of our jaw or the color of our eyes.

Yet there is sometimes a downside to individualism, privacy, and difference. Because we so respect what others believe – and their right to come to their beliefs within their own relationship with God – we are often hesitant to share with others in any way what we believe, experience, or even struggle within our faith. Sometimes we so want not to intrude on the

¹ These all come from the "Historic Principles of Church Order," written in 1788, and found in *The Book of Order: The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church, Part II, 2005-2007* (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 2005), G-1.0300.

relationship others may or may not have with God that we are silent about our own faith or our own experiences. As much as I affirm individualism, privacy, and difference, as impossible as I would find it to serve in a denomination that did not hold these in highest esteem, I am aware, like in many things, our greatest strength may sometimes be our greatest weakness.

I.

To address this potential weakness, let's look at the way Jesus invited people into discipleship with him.

In John's Gospel, two followers of John the Baptist see Jesus walk by and hear John immediately say: "Behold, the Lamb of God!"

These two disciples immediately start to follow Jesus.

When Jesus turns around and sees them following, he asks these disciples: "What are you looking for?"

They say: "Teacher, where are you staying?"

He says: "Come and see."

They "come and see" where Jesus is staying; they remain with him that day; and they become two of the first twelve disciples.

What is neat about this incident is that the first words that come out of Jesus' mouth in the Gospel of John are "What are you looking for?" and "Come and see."

The next day, another disciple, Philip, finds Nathanael and says, "We have found him about whom Moses and the prophets spoke, Jesus of Nazareth."

Nathanael says, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Philip says, "Come and see."

Nathanael "comes and sees" and becomes convinced.

In the Gospel of John and the earliest disciples invite people to find out who he is and what he is about. "Come and see."

II.

As I said, I am a great believer in individual conscience, privacy, and difference. Because of my love for these concepts, I know that I am sometimes silent when I should speak, reticent when I should venture forth with something from my own experience of God's grace, hesitant when I should share – all out of not wanting to intrude into something private and personal to people.

Yet nothing in the way Christ approaches people should lead me to be so reticent.

- "What is it you are looking for?" he asks.
- "Come and see," he invites.

His are words and ways of touching people that do not hinder their conscience, do not intrude on their privacy, do not fail to respect any difference that might become apparent between asker and asked. "Come and see." "Come and see."

III.

Rumor has it that we have had a few lengthy services in the past month or so. I will make just three brief comments about this passage:

(a)

I feel I know most of you well enough to believe that you have something in your faith, something in your experience of the spirit of God, something in your life at Westminster worth sharing. I believe many of you just may be in a position of asking someone “What is it that you are looking for?” I believe most of you can say with grace, integrity, and respect: “Come and see for yourself something I have experienced.”

Believe me: We can do so without restricting someone’s conscience, without invading their privacy, without failing to respect differences that might exist between us.

(b)

Second, I also think I know most of you well enough to know that you may from time to time be in a position to invite someone to our church. Inviting them to church, offering to pick them up or meet them here, offering to have a meal together afterwards, welcoming them when they are here, can be a terrific, non-intrusive way of inviting them to “come and see.” You may even want to invite them to attend something at Westminster short of worship. Your invitation may turn out to be the thing that invites them into faith or invites them into a new and deeper experience of faith. Without restricting their conscience. Without intruding on their privacy. Without ignoring their difference. “Come and see.”

(c)

Third, may I let you in on a little secret, a little theologically edgy link of this passage with another?

There is one other time in John’s Gospel that this phrase “come and see” appears. It is in the story of the raising of Lazarus, in Chapter 11. Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus, ask Jesus to “come and see,” that Lazarus, whom Jesus loves, has passed away. They ask him to “come and see,” he weeps. This is perhaps one of his most human moments. Is John sending us a subtle message here? Might our invitation to someone to “come and see” lead them to the most human moment in their life?

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Individual conscience. Privacy. Difference.

“What are you looking for?”

“Come and see.” “Come and see.”