

“Come and See” – January 15, 2017 – John 1:29-42

What does it mean to be called by God? Much of the time when we hear that phrase, we might immediately associate it with being led to do something, to perform a particular task or ministry. A person might say, I feel called to reach out to homeless people and volunteer time in a shelter, or I feel drawn to mentoring young people who are in poverty situations. Or it could be taking on a particular role in the church – called to be on the Property Committee or an office volunteer or a Sunday School teacher. A specific task within the church that utilizes a person’s skills and talents.

We also refer to officers in the church being called by God to a position in the church body where a specific role is to be assumed. Our ruling elders on session handle the business of the church and lead the various ministry teams. Our board of deacons carry out the ministry of compassion both to our members and out into the community.

So does calling always mean having to go do something? Is a call by God a call to go do some kind of work?

The passage from John’s gospel is often referred to as the calling of the first disciples. The passage opens with John testifying about the identity of Jesus. John always points away from himself, directing everyone’s attention away. In the previous verses, when some religious leaders come to the Jordan River, they ask John if he’s someone special. Is he the messiah, or is Elijah, or is he the Prophet? And John denies being any of these. They ask him, if you’re nobody, why do you baptize? And his response is that he baptizes so that the one who is coming might be revealed.

When John spots Jesus, he points to him and says, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” And John refers to having seen the Spirit of God descend upon him like of dove. That was the sign that he was to look for. And John, knowing now his identity, points to Jesus whenever he sees him. It’s as if John is saying, quit hanging around here. That is the one you are to follow. He is the one you want.

One day when he says this, two of John’s own disciples begin to follow Jesus. Jesus realizes they are coming along behind him so he turns to them and asks, “What are you looking for?” They address him using the word rabbi. They acknowledge that he is a teacher. And they ask him, “Rabbi, where are you staying?” He responds, “Come and see.”

I can still remember when this passage from John’s gospel first made an impact on me. It was my senior year in college in Kentucky, and I had been spending quite a bit of time at the Baptist Student Union, learning about Christianity. I had recently converted, and felt excited about the changes in my life, but I felt like there was still so much I needed to know and do. So many things that eluded me. I didn’t know all the bible stories. I didn’t know all the hymns. I didn’t know how to pray in public. I didn’t know what I was supposed to do. I wondered if I was supposed to go be some missionary in Africa or something. How on earth was I supposed to do everything I needed to do? One day while I was meeting with the

campus minister, I asked him – What now? What happens now? He told me to open my bible to this passage from John and told me to read verse 39. “He said to them ‘Come and see.’”

Come and see.

When the two men went after Jesus, based only upon what John had said about him, Jesus turned and asked them, “What are you looking for?” And they asked him, “Rabbi, where are you staying?” And he responded to them by offering an invitation, “Come and see.” And they followed him and stayed with him the rest of the day.

The call of Jesus is not a call to go out and do a bunch of things. Or a call to change the world for the better. The call to be a follower of Jesus Christ is primarily an invitation, a call to ‘come and see.’ It’s an invitation to a relationship.

One pastor made an interesting point about the difference between being called into relationship versus being called to do a task. To be called into relationship is an invitation to intimacy with another. Think about any of the personal relationships that you have. It is quite different from your signing up to do some kind of job or task. When you agree to do a job, it’s a straight-forward contract. There is a specific task that needs to be accomplished, and there are certain parameters and limits to how to perform the job. There is an expected outcome of what the finished product will look like. And there is an end point, a conclusion to the task, a time when the job is finished. Being called into relationship is quite different. Relationships are a mystery, there are no set expectations, no timelines, there are no blueprints or logical steps to be accomplished. To enter into relationship is to invite uncertainty and vulnerability into your life. It involves moving forward in blind trust, with no guidelines or standards to follow. (Rev. James Liggett, <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/stw/2014/01/06/2-epiphany-a-2014/>)

The invitation to come and see is a call to intimacy. Jesus is not a taskmaster or a foreman on a jobsite. Through Jesus we are invited to come into relationship with God. It is this relationship that is foundational to who we are as Christians. It is this intimacy with God that undergirds everything we do. This relationship holds primacy in our lives.

Often when we feel uncertain or confused about our path, about our journey in life, it is because we have neglected that relationship with Christ. We feel that something is missing, and we want to fill that empty space. We want to do something, thinking that through busyness and a sense of accomplishment we will find fulfillment. But ultimately, it is the relationship that matters.

In the Presbyterian tradition, we don’t talk much about this relationship with God. Many of us would rather talk about doctrine, learn new ways of thinking about Scripture, or do specific tasks that will impact the community or world in a positive way. Sometimes we feel uncomfortable talking about relationship and intimacy. If I learned anything from the

Baptists, I learned about relationship with God, and how important it is for us to nurture and tend to this intimacy. When we neglect the relationship, we begin to feel out of sorts.

We all know that relationships require energy for them to succeed. You don't simply move in together and go on as you did before. Relationships require taking the time to get to know each other, to learn about and tend to the needs of the other instead of focusing always on your own, to support and nurture one another. To grow and to learn to forgive.

When the two men left John and began following Jesus, the first thing Jesus told them to do was to come with him. To get to know him. To build a relationship with him. It was only after this initial relationship was formed that he began to task them with specific duties. But that didn't mean the relationship was over. Along the way he still continued to teach them, encourage them, discipline them and love them. The relationship was always there. Even before he died, Jesus did not want them to feel abandoned, so he promised to send them the Holy Spirit who would continually be available as a guide and as a comfort.

It is through the relationship with Jesus that we learn what it means to be his follower. How do we get to know him? We make an intentional effort to learn from him by studying his teachings, by witnessing his activities and by modeling our lives after his. We spend time in prayer – sometimes we don't know the words to say, or sometimes we babble about anything and everything, but sometimes maybe all we need is a few regular moments of focused silence. We listen to others – to our friends here at church, to our family, to trusted mentors and teachers – as they share with us and we share with them about our journeys of faith. It's not something we do in isolation. We're all on this same journey, even though our relationship with God is personal and unique to each of us. But by sharing our struggles, we can learn how to improve the relationship.

I think of all the times I sat down with my campus minister and talked to him about everything related to God and Christianity, this particular passage of scripture, and our long-ago conversation, sticks out to me so clearly because of how foundational it is. In my desire to cram everything I could about Christianity into my brain and then go out and do a bunch of things, I was neglecting the most important part. The relationship with God needs to be continually nurtured. We must spend time with Jesus, to get to know him, not just about him – but to know HIM. For when we truly know him, everything else will come naturally.

To become a disciple, we think we have to act a certain way and do certain things and change who we are. And certainly there are ways to act, and things to do, and parts of us to change. That comes in time. But taken at its most basic level, the call to be a disciple of Jesus Christ is, at its heart, an invitation to relationship, an invitation to come and see.