

Many Hands, One Heart, Sacred Love for All

January 15, 2023

Second Sunday After Epiphany

“The Gift of Story”

with The Rev. Dr. Alydia Smith

Isaiah 49:1-7; I Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-42

The next day John the Baptist saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel."

And John continued to testify, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God."

The next day John 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?"

Jesus said to them, "Come and see." So 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. Andrew first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (*which is translated Anointed*).

Andrew 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*).

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight our Lord, Rock and Redeemer. Amen

Last week, I told you that one of the reluctant catchphrase in my house during the pandemic was "*I cannot give what I do not have!*" What I didn't tell you was that now that my son Nicholas can talk, he challenges this notion, everytime I use it. *I cannot give you a candy, because I don't have a candy.* "Just look! You can do it" His new favorite, and the most effective is he takes his little hands, cups my face, looks me directly in the eye and says "I trust you mummy". So I search, digging deep in my mythical purse, and I always found something (or made something), maybe not the exact treat that he wanted, but it was something, and sometimes it was even something better than what I thought I was looking for! After a long search that triumphant moment of revelation feels like an Epiphany. And in

those moments of Epiphany, we might be doing the searching, but we don't find the gifts, the gifts are revealed to us.

Andrew, boldly proclaims his Epiphany to his brother Simon Peter: "we have found the Messiah" as if Jesus was a black unicorn in the mythical mall where I bought my purse filled with smarties. It is more like the Messiah was revealed to them, several times in fact, through John, and then through Jesus himself.

I wish there was more to the story. I wish we got a glimpse into what Andrew and the other disciple saw when they were with Jesus. Because I don't know what Andrew was looking for in a Messiah, but it sounds like he found it. Which is amazing. I might even be a bit jealous... it seems like our society and culture are filled with longing filled questions like:

What do you want? What are you looking for? What are you waiting for?

because *we are all searching for something* as Billy Joel sang. Some of us never listened to the advice of Fleetwood Mac and TLC and are still *chasing waterfalls*. And then many many more of us like Bono *still haven't found what we are looking for*. But Andrew found it! That's amazing.

We often seek community to answer these questions together. A beautiful heart and soul bond can form between us, when we know that we are looking, waiting, searching, chasing after the same thing. This vulnerable shared hope is often what bonds us as people of faith, our longing, waiting, searching, looking, aspiring for something better. It's a soul bond, and when we find out that we are not actually searching for the same thing, that our aspirations are different, perhaps even incompatible it hurts in a uniquely excruciating way. Nothing hurts quite like a church hurt as Ottis Moss III once preached.

I remember speaking to colleagues who served in United Church of Christ congregations after the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. Mostly clergy who felt hurt and betrayed that so many within their community were not willing to speak boldly against White Supremacy, some no longer felt safe. The people whom they loved and thought were with them, were not there when their presence was most needed and it hurt as only a church could hurt can.

During sunny times, it is easy to assume or imagine that we all want and are looking for the same things. It's even easier to imagine how our church friends will provide shelter and support when a storm rolls in. When tragedy actually happens and the storm rages, 'the excrement often hits the air conditioner' before there is a chance to have a soul chat with fellow sojourners about our expectations. In a storm, we witness instantly and instinctively who is prioritized? Who is cared for? Who is supported in their grief and trauma? What is sacrificed? What is shared? And in the aftermath, the people who are most hurt may not be around for the de-brief. They may just stop showing up, speaking-out, or getting involved. They may just re-categorize the church from soul friend, to sunny-weather friend. They may just leave. And could you blame them; nothing hurts like a church hurts.

I think it would be safe to assume that sunny weather Christians would make the Jesus who calmed the sea, broke bread with the person who would later betray him, and called each of us a friend, weep. We are intended for all-weather. But I fear that there are many of us out there who only know the church as a sunny-weather friend, and who rightly do not trust the church to mourn, grief, suffer and fight with them.

I am certain it makes us, who long to be good friends, weep.

We as a church need to be good friends to each other. We need to acknowledge and repent for the multiple times when we have failed to be good friends.

And that doesn't mean being benevolent (a United Church super power) or buddy buddies with everyone, being a good friend does not mean that we want to hang out in the mythical mall with each person in the congregation. It means having difficult conversations with each other, wrestling with those difficult questions of

What do we want? What are we looking for? What are we waiting for? What do we expect from a Messiah? What do we expect from each other? What do we mean by a better world?

So that we can trust each other enough to believe the testimonies of our fellow sojourners. To trust Andrew when he tells Simon, drop everything, including John and his disciples, because we have found the Messiah!

The sort of trust that kept the Montgomery bus boycott going for 381 days.

We do the hard work, so that I believe you when you say to me: keep on looking mama, you got this bro, work it out.

So that when you say, trust me, I will because I do, trust you.

We do the hard work so that we will have the strength and tenacity to keep on looking, trusting that together we will find something better than we could ever have imagined on our own.

One day, like Andrew, we will find what we are looking for, together.

May it be so friends,

Amen.