

CALLED INTO COMMUNITY

Sermon by Vicar Katherine Chatelaine-Samsen on January 15, 2017

Second Sunday after Epiphany/Commemoration of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

John 1:29-42

We are in the time after Epiphany, which is a season in which discover different ways that Christ is revealed to us. Our Gospel lesson this week continues to offer these discoveries.

John the Baptist is back and continues to point beyond himself to Jesus, the Messiah. Every time John comes across Jesus, he points him out and says “hey, look! it’s the Lamb of God!” And the people who are following John, notably Andrew and his friend, stop following John and start following Jesus. The author of John seems to think that all of us, as readers, will assume they did this because of what John was saying about Jesus – he’s the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He’s greater than John, yet was baptized by John. The Holy Spirit descended upon him! Perhaps Andrew and his friend decided to tag along with Jesus for a bit, following along on the outskirts of the crowd or sitting in the back row of wherever Jesus was teaching. Watching from a distance until they could figure him out and why they were so drawn to him.

Jesus doesn’t give them much time to do this before he asks, “what are you looking for?” A better translation from the original Greek is, “what are you seeking?” This question contains so much depth. By asking “what are you seeking” Jesus is asking questions of the heart and soul, not just the eyes and mind - what are you prepared to go on a journey for? What is at the heart of the reason why you stopped following John and started following me? Andrew and his friend don’t seem to have an answer, because they respond with a question. “Where are you staying?” Again, the original Greek is much better here for the word staying, which is *meno*. Where are you abiding? Where do you remain? Where do you dwell? There is a sense of permanence in their question. They’re not asking Jesus for the location of his tent, or the guest house where he’s staying; they want to know about the enduring, permanent, eternal dwelling place of Jesus, this person to whom they are drawn. They want to know where they can be with him to receive whatever he has to offer.

In response, Jesus offers them an invitation: come and see. And they did, and then were compelled to share this invitation with others. Come and see, Simon. Come and see what we have been seeking. Come and see this Messiah whom we have found. But the “come and see” comes with a catch, which is this: this won’t be a solo journey, and we don’t get to choose our companions on the way. The experience of encountering Jesus drew these disciples out of isolation and into community with Jesus and with one another. They would be forever changed not just by their Lord, but by the experience of knowing him in the company of people they never imagined they would walk alongside, and in service to people who were more different than they had experienced.

We’re at a time in our nation’s history where this message is needed more than ever. A deep sense of isolation and division has really taken hold. Stories of people who feel as if they have been left behind, forgotten, like no one knows their plight have been shared in

different ways. Jobs in their town may have dried up as the economy has transitioned, or other factors may have led to a deep feeling of hopelessness that manifests as fear and anger. There's also a deep division between people who identify as Democrat or Republican, as progressive or conservative. These different ideologies can lead to conflict or division on our Facebook newsfeeds, in our workplaces, or even in our families, as I know many of you have experienced. Even within each broad political group there are disagreements about the best way to move forward. Which voices are welcomed at the planning tables? What is the best strategy for advancing our party's agenda? Everywhere we turn there is opportunity for division. And in this highly confusing and stressful time it's often so tempting to retreat, to disengage with media, social or otherwise, not respond to comments made in the break room at work, not to have a dialogue with someone who thinks differently than we do. Isolation is so tempting, whether it's moving off the grid to a cabin in the Canadian woods as an extreme (I've thought about it!), or just choosing to participate exclusively in groups and communities of like-minded people.

Yet Jesus calls us out of our places of comfort and familiarity and into community with one another. He draws us out of our comfortable isolation into sometimes uncomfortable ways of being with one another.

The disciples who started following Jesus embarked on a new journey that was incredibly uncomfortable! They never really knew exactly what they were doing; they had to leave their homes and places of comfort; in the case of Simon Peter, they gave up their names; they encountered people who were crazy, who wanted to kill their teacher, and who wanted to kill them. They encountered a lot of division, even within their own group. And yet they participated in Jesus' call to reach out to others to build a community centered on him. They were drawn out of their places of isolation and into community with Jesus, with one another, and with so many more people.

We too are called out of our temptation toward isolation and into community with one another. We're called to leave our places of comfort to deeply engage with people who are different than us, think differently than us, people we disagree with – and this can be so uncomfortable! We are called to ask deep questions like Jesus did and we're called to deeply and openly listen to the answer that is given, even if it comes in the form of a question. When we ask, What are you seeking? we might hear more hard questions rather than easy answers, like Why don't I have a job? Why isn't life turning out the way I expected? Where can I go and be accepted for who I am? When we engage with people who think differently than us, we may be invited into places of deep connection through which relationships can be built, communities can develop, and love and respect can flourish. By being willing to engage and to listen, we carry Christ's invitation to "come and see" the vision of abundant life that Christ preached. We are called out of our places of comfortable isolation and into uncomfortable community with one another.

This weekend we're commemorating Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a man of God, champion of civil rights, and a modern-day prophet. (As an aside, I re-read many of his speeches, sermons, and essays to prepare for this sermon and I was struck by how so many of them could have been written yesterday, especially what he wrote in his last year of life.) Many

of us are familiar with his work in the earlier part of his life that was focused on voting rights for the African American community. This is the King that we learn about in history class, the one that the dominant culture in our country likes to talk about. Today I want to focus on the King who had moved on to the second phase of the civil rights movement, moving from political freedoms to the economic empowerment of African Americans and indeed, all people, the Martin Luther King Jr. who made people deeply uncomfortable with his message of not just acceptance, but equality for the African American community. He made white Americans uncomfortable by pointing out that they still had a long way to go toward viewing African Americans as completely human and he made members of the African American community uncomfortable with his strict adherence to nonviolence and message of cooperation with white partners. Many of his followers began to abandon him. Threats against his life increased. He was no longer a man who was invited to the White House or spoken of favorably on the nightly news. Yet he persisted. King was motivated by a vision, or dream of a Beloved Community in which all people regardless of race, class, gender, or nationality experience love, justice, brotherhood and sisterhood as a way of life. It was a dream that made people uncomfortable because all people meant people that others didn't want to be around. But it was a dream that was firmly grounded in Jesus' teachings about love, justice, and community. And, as we know, Jesus makes people uncomfortable.

King *got* that Jesus calls us out of places of comfortable isolation into community with one another. He got it so deeply that he staked his entire life on proclaiming this dream. King encountered Jesus and invited everyone to come and see this Jesus person, and experience abundant life together through him.

We are living in a significant time that is going to demand a lot from each and every one of us. And as followers of Jesus, we have a lot to offer. When we hear a divisive or hateful comment in the break room at work, we can ask a question instead of walking out of the room. We can find a friend and join discussion groups or meet-ups made up of people who profess a different way of thinking than we do and engage in an authentic dialogue. We can reach across divides to build relationships and community, to dwell with Jesus, and to change hearts and minds to reflect the love that Jesus showed for all of creation.

I pray that in the midst of the challenges we encounter, we are able to draw upon a deep well of faith that urges us to depart from our places of isolation and comfort to engage with people who may stretch us and make us uncomfortable. I pray that we are able to participate in the healing of our nation and world by reaching out to others to build the community that our encounter with Christ compels us to build. I pray that we may be witnesses to the world through our words and deeds as we proclaim, "we have found the Messiah – come and see!"

Thanks be to God, AMEN.