

“Called into the Fellowship”
Isaiah 49:1-7; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9;
John 1:29-51

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Coming into this new year, I was wondering what sermon series to do. Nothing was becoming clear to me, so I just started following the lectionary. As I did that, it made me think about how we are being encouraged to engage with Jesus. So, I’m calling this series “Engaging with Jesus.”

At Christmas, we celebrated Jesus’ birth and the wonder of what that might mean. Then, as we go into the new year, we go into Ordinary Time, in which we begin to engage with what Jesus is doing and who Jesus is, and what he is about. Today, he begins to invite some people to come with him.

If I think about what it means to engage with the Son of God, I get a little nervous. It seems a little high and mighty to me, but scripture seems to suggest that he simply begins to engage with the people who were around him. He invites them. So, I guess we can keep calm because we are invited to engage as well, and be part of what he is doing.

If we look at what he’s doing here in engaging these disciples, first we hear that he’s engaging people who heard from John that there’s something special about who he is. They come to try to find him. They encounter him, and he asks them to come and see what he’s up to. One of those goes to grab his brother. So not only is Jesus encountering people, the people he encounters are going and finding and encountering people.

The first group comes to find him. The second person he encounters is Philip. He found Philip. The word for “found” there means he was looking for him. It wasn’t like he just ran across him. It seems that he went to find him for some reason. Philip encounters Jesus in a way that makes him want to go and find Nathaniel. So here we have the beginnings of people encountering Jesus and wanting others to encounter Jesus. In that process, it’s those people who heard something good about Jesus who wanted to come, and we have Nathaniel, who doesn’t think anything good can come out of Nazareth but he decides to come anyway and see what Jesus was up to.

In the children’s sermon, Jeremiah said that hearing somebody talk about a movie is not as good as seeing the movie. As we hear about these folks encountering Jesus, being invited to come and see what Jesus is up to, it’s not quite as good as the movie, but we’re going to try to talk about what it means to come and see Jesus. That’s what I hear Paul doing in the beginning of First Corinthians. He’s talking to some people who you might say have been to the movie. They have encountered something wonderful. They have encountered Jesus. Paul is reminding them of what it was that they encountered. When you come and see Jesus, what it is that we have seen? What is it that we’ve encountered?

The first thing that it says is that you are sanctified. That's a fancy word, but it just means "to be cleansed." Maybe you can go through life without ever feeling like you've ever failed at anything or that there's any kind of dirt clinging to your life from the struggles. But somehow in encountering Jesus, in engaging with Jesus, we discover that we don't feel dirty anymore. He somehow cleanses us and enables us to feel pure again, to feel like the mistakes we made aren't defining the rest of our lives. In doing that, there's an invitation.

As he encounters each of the disciples in this story, there's an invitation to come and see, to come and follow, to come and stay with him, to discover him. If you are invited, you feel wanted. It reminds me of the movie about Mr. Rogers, because there's a way in which Jesus always seemed to make people feel like he cared about them, that they were wanted. This leads to feeling loved, but it's also the sense of grace that Paul is talking about in First Corinthians. Sometimes we think of grace as forgiveness, but sometimes we talk about it as the surprise gift of love, when we find that we are all of a sudden not only wanted, but cared for. We are in the presence of one that cares about who we are, what our life is about, how it is lived, how we experience it.

One we don't seem to think about quite as much in my mind is that there's a sense of being educated when we come to see Jesus. It talks about it in terms of "we are enriched in him in speech (reasoning expressed in words is the translation of that), and knowledge (experientially known piecing together of the whole). There's a way in which encountering Jesus is not just encountering being wanted or being loved, but it begins to shape our experience of life, how we communicate in the sense of being able to talk reasonably with one another. The experience shapes us into being able to see something new, something whole, something more complete about life.

It goes on to talk about how we are given the gifts of the Spirit. We are gifted. One of the ways I think about this is that we've got a place to start from. We've been given our lives. We've been given opportunities and abilities. We don't start from scratch as if there's nothing. If nothing else, we have this ability to be empathetic. It's a human trait, but in Christ, we get to develop that. It's a gift that we already are given. I'm thinking about being gifted as a place to start. We've already got something to work with.

It goes on to say that we will be strengthened to the end, that we may be blameless. "To be strengthened" there really means "to walk on solid ground." My sense of that is that it's like being led through the swamp. Life never seems like a swamp, does it? There are a lot of times in my life where I'm trying to figure out which way to go without getting stuck in the mire and the mud. Which way should I go? Being led by Jesus, I think, has truly helped me find a way that seemed more solid.

Finally, he notes that we are inducted into a community of faith, into a fellowship that enables us to experience all of this, to be part of this.

If we think about all those things, we might realize that when we come and see Jesus, we are reminded that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. One way of thinking about taking away the sins is by making them evident. Sometimes I'll do things that I'll think are okay because I like to do them or because

somebody tells me it's a good thing to do, and I can find out it's wrong. When I find out it's wrong, I don't want to do it anymore. There is a way in which Jesus does that for us. That's one way Jesus takes away the sins of the world—he reveals them to us and invites us in a different way.

Let's think about that for a minute. In this passage we see some of that happening. We see him inviting both the people who already think he's a great guy and the people like Nathaniel, who don't think anything good can come from Nazareth. He breaks down those particular barriers by inviting them to come and see. I sometimes wonder if I spend too much time trying to argue a point or trying to engage with a description rather than inviting someone to just come and see. Jesus is inviting us to engage in a way of living rather than trying to describe it. There might be something about that. It almost seems like a general rule that maybe I should pay more attention to. Be engaged with Jesus rather than just talking about Jesus. Be engaged with what he is encouraging us to do.

One of the things he seems to be engaged in here is breaking down some barriers. Today we have so many barriers. Tomorrow we celebrate Martin Luther King Day and he had something to say about the barriers we create as well. He was talking about segregation and segregation laws, but here's what he said:

“All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority.”

We've been pretty clear about doing that with race. That is a way that we have created that kind of segregation. Yet today, it continues, not only with race. It feels like our divisions today are on the verge of creating a segregated society because we are dividing over issues, but we take those issues and make it about personality. Any time we begin to segregate, we make it about superiority and inferiority. We are creating those who are better and those who are worse. We're creating us and them. In doing so, we are missing the grace of Christ.

I was in a conversation over Christmas break with somebody I know pretty well, and the vehemence of the “us and them” piece really struck me. When someone's position gives way to something that feels too much like hatred, we lose the very love and grace of God that must inform us if we are to follow Jesus. In this passage Jesus is bringing people together. He does this throughout his career. If you look at the disciples, there's a group there that are very disparate and probably wouldn't have cared for each other had it not been for Jesus.

The other piece of this is that when the world is to come and see Jesus today, where do they go? Who is the body of Christ in today's world? We are. We have met Jesus and we have begun to see the characteristics of Jesus. We are to be people who exhibit those characteristics, who are able to help people feel clean. We are to be a place where people are invited or wanted. A place where we help people experience the grace of God, where the love is real and the caring is shared. A place where we are expanding our understanding by walking after Jesus. A place where we're learning new

speech, new ways of knowing because Jesus is showing us that the Spirit is at work among us. A place where we are inducted into a fellowship that truly cares for one another, not because we all agree, but because we are all children of God. Not because we all agree, but because we all know the same Savior. Then the light that Jesus brings into the world can be seen, and seen through us. For the passage suggests that the light of God is coming into the world and is coming to all nations, to the ends of the earth. In Jesus, people came and experienced healing. They recognized a peace, a wholeness, a blessing. We are invited to express that in who we are, as well, as we engage with Jesus.

For me, in following Jesus and engaging with Jesus, I'm ever challenged to be more like Jesus and to be in a community that becomes the body of Christ and expresses who Christ is. As we do that, we can be a light in a place of darkness. We can show love instead of hatred. We can show grace instead of judgement. We can reveal goodness and hope and trust. Amen.