

St. James' Epiphany 2A January 16th, 2011

I speak in the name of Jesus Christ to the Church of God that is at St. James', to [you] who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints.

Several years ago, the United Church of Christ – a mainline, more liberal denomination in the United States – produced the following TV commercial:

Church bells chime. Two muscle-bound men stand arms-crossed in front of a Gothic cathedral. A gay couple approaches holding hands. "Step aside, please", say the muscle-bound guards. They speak similar words to an African-American girl, a Hispanic man, a young man in a wheelchair. Then, just as we realize that the two large men are "church bouncers", the scene fades to black and the tag line reads: "Jesus didn't turn people away. Neither do we."

This 30-second commercial sparked many weeks of debate in the US after CBS and NBC refused to air it, claiming that it was too controversial, and would be offensive to many, even though the commercial was completely in line with all the "official" guidelines. Yet one pastor noted the positive outcome of the networks' decision was that there was a lively debate about an issue that perhaps should be controversial for Christians – that of hospitality.

Within the wider culture of which they were a part, early Christian communities stood out because of the way they practiced hospitality. Non-Christians also highly valued hospitality, but it was discriminate, directed towards family, friends and personal associates, with the idea, of course, that these people could and would reciprocate. Christian hospitality, on the other hand, was "notoriously indiscriminate", because not only was *everyone* and *anyone* welcome, but there seemed to be a particular desire to welcome those who were least likely to return the invitation – widows and orphans; the outsiders, the estranged. In a small way, Christian hospitality was an object and subject of controversy in the ancient world.

"The hospitality of Jesus was [certainly] controversial. He chafed against the limits of social propriety by welcoming" those considered to be the least acceptable; least acceptable by God, least acceptable by society.

“[Jesus] hospitality knew no limit. It was not just indiscriminate; it was promiscuous.”

Jesus models the Divine hospitality, seen from the first moments of creation, when God invites humankind to share in creation; and not simply as recipients, but as participants, as co-creators. The act of incarnation, of God coming amongst us in the person Jesus, is another act of hospitality in which God, who loves us, opens the door and welcomes us in to new, renewed, abundant and eternal life, as children of God. Divine hospitality lies at the very heart of who we are.

This pattern of invitation, of being welcomed in, can be seen in our reading this morning from the Gospel of John. Two men, whom we are told are disciples of John the Baptist, approach Jesus. Jesus says not “who are you?”, but rather, “what are you looking for?” They say to him, “Teacher, where are you staying?” Jesus says, “Come and see.” One of the men named Andrew, first goes and finds his brother, Simon Peter. “We have found the Messiah”, he says. “The anointed one.” They came, and saw where he was staying, and remained with him that day. And we know that Andrew and Peter became foundational leaders in the early church.

John, the Gospel-writer, *“wants us to see that simple words of invitation [“come and see”] are more crucial to the building up of the Body of Christ than even great proclamations of faith “*It is through words of invitation and welcome that the church begins; it is through words of invitation and welcome that the church grows.

We are beginning with the first of many passages that we will hear from John’s Gospel over the coming weeks. This Gospel has often been called a “Gospel of signs”, and it is through these signs, the actions and words of Jesus, that Jesus is revealed as Son of God, Lamb of God. And it is always about the personal encounter; today it’s Jesus’ invitation to Andrew and Peter, and an unnamed man. Later during Lent we’ll encounter Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the man born blind, Mary, Martha and Lazarus.

We hear this Gospel also in light of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, whose theme this year is “The Church in Jerusalem: Yesterday. Today and Tomorrow.” The worship services for this week were

prepared over this past year by Christians living in Jerusalem, that ancient city through which we are connected with some of our most ancient faith roots. Rooted in Jerusalem are Jews, Muslims and Christians.

One hundred years ago, when this week of prayer came into being, unity – not uniformity, but unity – was seen more as an end in itself. In this day and age, we are aware of the wider, global context in which we live. We are aware of other faiths, and we are aware of the profound necessity to learn about and to understand them; and to be in conversation and dialogue. We pray for unity of purpose and direction, so that we might look outward, beyond ourselves.

One of Lorne's photos from Israel, taken in Nazareth, was of a large outdoor banner which read, "*Nazareth Advocates the Singleness of God.*" This banner speaks of a profound desire of Christians, Jews and Muslims, who live in a deeply fractured society, to claim a common rootedness, a unity built upon our common belief in one God, and upon our shared ancestor Abraham. It is for this that we must pray without ceasing, for so much of our shared future as fellow inhabitants of this planet depends upon it.

John the Baptist sees Jesus coming towards him, and he declares, "*Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*" We know from the very first lines of John's Gospel, that John – author – was acutely aware that many of the Jewish community did not accept Jesus, or believe that he was Son of God. "*The Word/Jesus was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. Jesus came to his own home, and his own people received him not.....yet to all who believe, he gave power to become children of God.....*" And yet John the Baptist declares Jesus to be the Lamb of God who takes away the sins – not simply of those who believe, not some group of "chosen ones".....but the sins of the world. God so loves the world.

Jesus says, "Come, and see.....". Someone once asked South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu how it was that the Anglican communion – so diverse culturally, linguistically, theologically and politically managed to stay in one piece. Bishop Tutu replied simply, "*We meet*". As Anglicans we know – and we sometimes forget! – what can happen

when people of good faith meet. When they “come and see”together. Not to achieve sameness or uniformity.....but to grow in understanding, to build connection and relationship. And that’s when good things.....that’s when great things.....begin to happen.

The Biblical theme of this Week of Prayer for Christian unity comes from the Book of Acts, which describes the early church in Jerusalem: *They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.....and day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.*

Jesus says, “Come and see” *“Christ invites us to enter into a shared life.”* As *“Gracious Host”* Christ invites us to a table, set for us. Our hospitality, our reaching out – within and without – is a reflection of and a participation in this divine hospitality. We extend a welcome to others because Christ welcomes us. We invite because we ourselves have received an invitation to the supper of the Lamb, who takes sins away the sins of the world. “Come and see”

Rev’d Lynn A. Mitchell+

Quotations from “The Other ‘H’ Word” by Mark Ralls Pastor of St. Timothy United Methodist Church in Brevard, North Carolina

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