

“By Invitation, not Command” – John 1:43-51 – Jan 15/06

I don't know about you, but I'm sure glad this week is over and we've made it to Sunday! Some of you know that the past two weeks, right after the flurry of Christmas and New Year's I've been taking a course at VST. This is part of my work toward a ThM (Master of Theology) Degree which hopefully will be a stepping-stone to a PhD. This particular course that I've just finished (well, the project still needs to be done and the paper written, but the class sessions are over) packed an entire course into nine days – brutal! The subject was education, in particular “Transformative Learning in Adult Education” and was presented by Dr. Roberta Clare, the Director of the Elder's Institute at St. Andrew's Hall. It was a great course, and I'll mention more about the project later.

I had the privilege to lead our opening devotions on Friday, and after digging through a lot of Bible texts, I settled on using the text from John's gospel for today, partly because it is a wondrous little episode, but mostly because it (along with the little section that precedes it) gives a powerful demonstration of one of Jesus' very effective teaching techniques.

There are several curious statements and questions made in this encounter between Jesus and two men whom He called to be disciples. On the previous day, two others, Andrew and Simon (who would be renamed Peter) who were disciples of John the Baptizer heard John comment about Jesus being the “Lamb of God”. Intrigued, they turned to follow Jesus who turned and asked them, “what are you looking for?” (Note how powerfully we can read our own prejudices into that question – with but the merest change in inflection that question changes from a gentle almost academic enquiry – “what are you looking for?” through a more confrontational, “what do you want?” and even to the harsh and dangerous street challenge of “what are you looking at?”)

That sequence is repeated in the event of the next day, the episode we read, only this time the challenging question is posed by yet another new disciple, Nathaniel, to his buddy Philip. “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” is the question, and again we can all too easily force our own interpretation onto the question, depending on our experience or our attitude. Depending on inflection that question can be heard ranging from a gentle, self-effacing sense of wonder, “could it be possible something good can come out of Nazareth?”, signaling a hopefulness, to a snotty and arrogant derision, “can anything good come out of Nazareth?”, where the implication is “of course nothing can!”

Again, the powerful clue comes from Jesus' response, and what that response conveys. Jesus doesn't rise to the challenge about Nazareth – instead he proclaims about a positive characteristic of Nathaniel: “behold an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” Jesus doesn't argue with Nathaniel about the merits of Nazareth, nor even about the neighbouring town of Cana which appears to be Nathaniel's home town. Jesus doesn't even confront Nathaniel about the nature of his question, but instead affirms Nathaniel and his lack of guile.

Naturally enough, Nathaniel is deflected by Jesus' statement, and a bit off guard asks, “how do you know me?” to which Jesus replies with another most curious statement, “I saw you under the fig tree.” Now I would love to know, and so would people for the last two thousand years, just what Nathaniel was up to ‘under the fig tree’. Scholars and authors and preachers and all kinds of believers have tied themselves up in knots trying to justify why they think Nathaniel was doing something righteous there under that fig tree

– I remain unconvinced! But whatever it was, Jesus’ knowing about it was enough to convince him that Jesus was truly the Messiah.

That affirming of Nathaniel and demonstrating His supernatural knowledge was an effective teaching technique that Jesus used, but it’s not the one I was thinking of. What intrigued me more was the simple invitation from Jesus to Andrew and Simon (Peter), “come and see.” No histrionics, no laying out of an advanced degree program, no harsh command to “go and learn, and when you think you’ve learned enough come back and I’ll test you!” Jesus’ response to the hunger for faith in Andrew and Peter was not a command but an invitation, “come and see.”

Apparently they did, and Philip must have heard them talking (after all, he was from the same city as Andrew and Peter) because he echoes that same invitation to Nathaniel. Jesus found Philip, and invited him, “follow me” and Philip did, inviting Nathaniel to come along. And when Nathaniel asked his confrontational question, Philip in turn invited him to “come and see.” See the progression? Jesus to Andrew and Peter: “come and see.” Philip to Nathaniel, “come and see.” The invitation to learning and growth was absorbed and passed on. The gentle, invitational teaching method of Jesus was picked up by and emulated by his disciples.

Now it is true that a ‘command’ style of instruction can also get passed on ... but it’s useful to note that the command style of instruction is only ‘effective’, if you can call it that, in institutions like jails, the military and para-military organizations, where attendance is enforced with violence.

On the other hand, the invitational style of Jesus helped to build a legion of uncounted voluntary followers, lasting for untold generations. “Come and see” He invited the first two; “follow me” He invited Philip; “come and see” echoed Philip to Nathaniel, and the circle of believers widened.

In fact, that widening of the circle of believers is really what the story of this incident is about, not just the teaching technique the understanding of will help me earn the credits from the course (which is good, too) ... this story is a testimony to the widening circle of witness and faith that in the concluding verse includes you and me.

Nathaniel’s confession of faith seems a bit too elaborate, a bit too big to have been prompted solely by Jesus’ words to him, especially since he was so reluctant to be accepting when talking with Philip. As “truly an Israelite”, Nathaniel (who is never mentioned in any other Gospels nor in Acts) could be seen as representative of believing Israel, those within Judaism who accepted Jesus as Messiah. There is some support for that view in the reference to “angels of God ascending and descending”, clearly invoking the image of Jacob at Bethel, where Jacob became Israel.

But the elaboration from a simple story of a person meeting Jesus into a Christian proclamation is much clearer in the original Greek, where the shift from a singular ‘you’ to a plural ‘you’ is readily apparent in the last verse, “Very truly, I tell (many) you ...” In the conclusion to this episode, Jesus speaks to all, including us.

But it’s the teaching pattern that caught my eye, and I think helps us in our faith. It seems as easy as one, two, three. By invitation, not command, Jesus calls, “come and see.” A disciple emulates Him, and invites, “come and see.” We, in turn, _____(fill in the blank)_____.

And so, back to my project from the course. Some of you know that I asked our student, Bev, to design a workshop to help us offer hospitality to visitors. She has done a

fine job, and I am using her work in my project, which is to evaluate the workshop from a transformative learning perspective. We have a wonderful group of volunteers who offer to greet people arriving for worship, and this workshop is intended to help them to do that, and perhaps to help us all extend our hospitality beyond greeting. And so the workshop will be offered both to those who currently server as greeters, and to any others who might be interested in participating in this Hospitality Ministry. “Come and see” how we can live out in our turn the gentle invitation handed down from Jesus to his disciples and to us, an invitation (not a command) to be offered in turn to all, “come and see.”