SERMON TEXT FOR EPIPHANY 2B - 1/14/24

Text: John 1:43-51

Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

How many of you think we are a “welcoming church”? (show hands?)

I am glad you think so, and I believe you are right. Being welcoming involves DOING something – usually something that makes US feel good – like offering hospitality to visitors, making new people feel comfortable, changing our format or our environment to be more user friendly. They are good things to do, and we do them for good reasons.

But here’s what I think: I think we should STOP being a welcoming church. That’s right. I think we need to STOP being a welcoming church. That’s not to say we should stop offering hospitality to visitors or stop trying to make new people feel comfortable. Those are still good things to do, and it makes us feel good to do them. But WELCOMING implies that we are here…passively waiting for guests to drop by. We are here… secure in our comfort zone, and what we expect is that new people will venture outside their comfort zones in order to set foot inside our space. WELCOMING is neither an effective, nor a Biblical approach to sharing the Good News of Jesus.

Consider, for a moment, today’s reading from the Gospel of John:

*The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He FOUND Philip and said to him, “FOLLOW ME.” Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip FOUND Nathanael and said to him, “We have FOUND him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.” Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “COME and SEE.”* (John 1:43-46 NRSV; emphasis mine)

In these four brief verses, “FOLLOW ME” occurs twice, and the verb FOUND is used three times. FOUND…FOLLOW…COME…SEE These are all forms of ACTION words. There is nothing PASSIVE about it.

It is also worth noting that JESUS is the one who gets the ball rolling here. After his own baptism by John at the Jordan River, JESUS decides to go to Galilee. Somewhere along the way JESUS finds Philip and issues an INVITATION: Follow me. Jesus doesn’t sit by the side of the road somewhere, passively waiting for someone to come along. No, Jesus actively and intentionally goes looking for Philip, finds him, and then INVITES him into a relationship.

John’s gospel leaves out many of the details of Jesus’ first interactions with these new disciples; but something about Jesus convinced Philip that he must be God’s promised Messiah. Philip certainly didn’t have it all figured out yet – but that didn’t stop him from FINDING his friend Nathaniel and INVITING Nathaniel to COME AND SEE Jesus. I suspect that when Nathaniel responded to the invitation, Philip was right alongside him. Certainly Nathaniel experienced welcome and hospitality in the presence of Jesus and Jesus’ growing group of followers. But the welcome and the hospitality came AFTER the seeking, AFTER the inviting, AFTER the accompaniment.

The God we worship is not a stand-offish, passive, wait-and-see kind of God. God’s pattern is one of active involvement with all of God’s creation. Throughout the Bible we hear again and again how God took action on behalf of God’s people and the world God loves. Time and again God gets mixed up in human affairs… until finally God had to come here in flesh and blood.

God became fully human in the person of Jesus – seeking, finding, inviting, forgiving, and loving us into a relationship with our creator. God – in Jesus – came to meet us where we are in the midst of our sin and our brokenness – eventually taking it all with him to the cross. God raised Jesus from the dead so that God might be actively involved with the people and the world God loves for all eternity.

God is not a passive God when it comes to us. Through the gift of Holy Baptism, God’s Spirit continues to SEEK us, FIND us, and INVITE us back into an active relationship with God. It’s not a one-time thing, but something that happens every time we pause to remember our baptism. As followers of Christ who are created in God’s own image, we are meant to be ACTIVE people; we have the process of SEEKING, FINDING, and INVITING others to COME AND SEE imprinted in our DNA.

And so today I want to suggest that we move from being a welcoming church to becoming an inviting church. I want to challenge us to reconnect with our spiritual DNA, and be the people God created and redeemed us to be. We’ll start simply by getting more comfortable using the phrase “my church”. [It’s really GOD’s church, but we need a way to talk about it with others!]

So here’s how this works: Turn to someone in the row ahead or behind you and use the words “my church” in a sentence. Something like: “Just go a few blocks past MY CHURCH, and you’ll see the grocery store.” … Or, “I can’t go to the movie Wednesday night because I’ll be having supper at MY CHURCH.” … Or, “I saw the best sunrise this morning on the way to MY CHURCH.” Now go ahead….try it! ☺ *(pause)*

See, that wasn’t so hard, was it?! Now, have a similar conversation with one or two people each week for the next couple of weeks. We are part of a GREAT church, and we shouldn’t be shy about saying so! And we needn’t think we will embarrass someone by talking about our church. After all, our friends are interested in what our jobs are, who our family consists of, and what hobbies we have. Why wouldn’t they be interested in our church too?

And because God is active, you never know what God might be up to. Your seemingly random comment about something to do with YOUR CHURCH, might just be the opening God will use to SEEK and FIND and INVITE someone into an everlasting relationship of love and mercy and grace.

My hope, as we move forward in this new year, is that we continue to live out the mission God has for us: proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ. We’ll do that best by being an INVITING CHURCH – one whose people are actively SEEKING, FINDING, and INVITING others to experience what we already know: nothing less than the radical love and hospitality of Christ in this place! Thanks be to God! Amen.

[Sermon text by Rev. Tamara Bull, New Hope Lutheran Church, Great Falls, MT]