

SERMON TEXT FOR EPIPHANY 2A

PREACHED JANUARY 15, 2017 AT ZION LUTHERAN, ENOLA PA

TEXT: JOHN 1.29-42, Isaiah 49.1-7, Psalm 40.1-11, 1 Corinthians 1.1-9

As the US prepares to inaugurate its next president this week, I am reminded of one of John F. Kennedy's famous quotes: "Ask not what your country can do for you; rather, ask what you can do for your country."

What if we were to relate that statement to our **church**? The quote would then be: "Ask not what your church can do for you, but what **you** can do for your church." In this age of **consumerism**, many people searching for a church home ask the question, "What can this church do for me? Does it have programs for me? Are there worship services that appeal to me at a time that is convenient for me? Is there a large, active program for my children? And most importantly, are they going to talk about money and tell me how much to give? Notice how many times the word "me" is spoken in those questions, with no thought of what **they** have to **give back** to the church.

"Ask not what your church can do for you, but what you can do for your church." That would not be the **worst** mission statement I've heard for a church, but I cannot imagine these words coming out of Jesus' mouth – at least not in today's gospel. In fact, we hear almost the **opposite** statement.

Today's reading from the **fourth** gospel, the gospel of **John**, is a series of people telling each other that **they have seen Jesus** and **who they think Jesus is**. It begins with John (the Baptist, though not described here as such) who in this chapter has **repeatedly** been asked if he is the Messiah. "No, I'm not the Messiah," he says like a broken record. "That would be someone **else**, someone much **greater** than me."

So the next day when he sees **Jesus** walking toward him, John declares, *"Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"* And two of John's disciples **follow after** Jesus. When Jesus notices that they are following him, he asks them what turns out to be a very **profound** question.

"What are you looking for?" Jesus asks the two followers. Now, "What are you looking for?" is a fairly **strange** question when you think about it. A more **logical** question would be, "What are you **doing**?" Or, "What do you **want**?" But Jesus **always** seems to be puzzling people, so I guess, *"What are you looking for?"* seems like a natural question (and one that is less **judgmental**) for Jesus to ask.

In any case, our NRSV translation **misses the mark** somewhat in translating the verb as "**looking**." Perhaps a **better** translation for that word would be **seeking**. What are you **seeking**? Who or what are you **looking** for in the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world?

The two followers respond with a question of their own: *"Where are you staying?"* Again, the translation may be a little **off**. The same word can mean **"stay"** or **"remain."** So, "Jesus," they ask, "where will you be so that we can spend **time** with you, develop a **relationship** with you?"

Jesus doesn't give them an **answer** to their question. He doesn't question them any further either. All he does in response is to make an **invitation**: *"Come and see."*

Jesus' invitation is really quite simple. It's **non-threatening**. It's **clear**. It's **precise**. It's inherently **relational**. And it's something **any** of us could say, which invites us to imagine **evangelism** rather differently. Evangelism, by its very nature, does not have to be **intrusive** or **abrasive** or **pushy**. Evangelism is offering a simple and relational invitation to other people seeking something more than the **culture** has to offer. It is an invitation for people to come and experience the joy and life that **we** have experienced in Christ.

And here's the thing: It's not just **us** who are offering this invitation. It is **God in Christ working through us** to invite others to abundant life so much richer than anything we can **buy**. And, just as importantly, it's God in Christ inviting **us** to that same life - **even if we struggle** to name or understand or articulate our faith. **Even when** we opt for cheap substitutes we think we can **buy** or **earn** rather than receive the gift of faith from God. **Even when we struggle** to share our faith with others. **Even when** we wonder if we **believe** at all. Even if **all** of that, **Jesus is still there**, still asking what we most deeply **need**. He is still **inviting** us to **come and see**, and still determined to give us more than we can possibly imagine. **Jesus simply will not give up on us. Ever.**

"Ask not what your church can do for you, but what you can do for your church." With all deference to our former president, I'm going to ask what your church can do for you. What are you **seeking**? What do you hope to **find**? What do you **need**? What do you most deeply **long** for? What do you most **hope** for?

Is it **silence** in a world of so much noise?

Is it **relationship** in a world increasingly isolated and isolating?

Is it **community** in an individualistic and often lonely culture?

Is it the chance to **serve** and be connected to others in a world that encourages putting yourself first?

Is it **hope and courage** when headlines inspire only fear and despair?

Is it **Sabbath rest** in a 24/7 world where relentless busy-ness has become a badge of honor and is regularly substituted for meaningful activity and necessary rest?

What is it that we most **need**, and **how can our congregation provide it?** We have **limited resources**, it is true. But we have people power, and we have God! So maybe we can respond to at least **one deep need**, find one **purpose** around which to organize our efforts, identify **one hallmark** of our community to lift up that others may see who we are and what we offer, and then work to have those needs met.

Of course, the **flip side** of that is what **JFK** was aiming for, and what we need to meet the needs and desires of others: **What can you do** for your church, your community, your family, your country? What are you willing to **give** (or **give up**) so that **others' needs** are met?

Our prayer of the day sums it up perfectly: Holy God, our strength and our redeemer, by your Spirit hold us forever, that through your grace we may worship you and faithfully serve you, follow you and joyfully find you, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. AMEN