

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, October 16, 2022

John 1:43-51

So we continue this morning with our worship series Finding Our Why. Our question, as we talked about at the beginning of worship, is why invite. Why invite? We are asking ourselves in this autumn season why is it that we do what we do. And today it is a question of invitation and hospitality. So we need to introduce the scene for you before we read from the Gospel of John, the first chapter, verses 43 through 51. If you want to, you can go ahead and get prepared to follow along in your pew Bible or at home in your Bible there.

So there's this scene where a couple of disciples of John are hanging out with John the Baptist, and Jesus walks by, and John recognizes Jesus and claims him to be the Lamb of God. It's this scene where you can imagine everything freezes as Jesus makes his way across the terrain, and John captures everyone's attention. Behold the Lamb of God.

And then a couple of John's disciples, they asked Jesus where he is staying. They follow along taking the prompting of their own rabbi, and they go and they ask Jesus, "Where are you staying?" And he says to them, "Come and see."

And Philip is among those that go to see where Jesus is staying.

And then we get to the text that we have this morning, not actually knowing what took place when they went to the place where Jesus was staying. We don't get a window into what the conversation is like on the dinner table or what deep theological questions they might have wrestled with. Instead, we simply skip to the next day. In verse 43–

The next day Jesus decided to leave Galilee. Finding Philip, he 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 the one that Moses wrote about in the law and about whom the prophets also wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, son of Joseph.' Nazareth? Can anything good come from there?' Nathaniel asked. 'Come and see,' said Phillip. When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said to him, 'Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!' 'How do you know me?' Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, 'I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you.' Then Nathanael declared, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!' Jesus said, 'You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater

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things than that.’ And he then added, ‘Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.’

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen. So whatever it is that happened that day with Philip, it was enough for him the next day to not only immediately respond to Jesus's call to follow him, but also to go and grab Nathanael, his friend, and to declare to him that the one that they have been waiting for is actually here, and his name is Jesus, and he is from the town of Nazareth.

Nathaniel is skeptical, as Jeanine shared with our children just a few moments ago. “Can anything good come out of that town? I don't believe it.” Philip doesn't try to convince him. He simply says ‘come and see.’ Whatever it is that he has experienced in the presence of God has necessitated him inviting his friend to join in the journey. And the experience that Philip had that allowed him to make, or encouraged him to make that invitation to Nathanael—that experience, it is not hyperbole to say, will change Nathanael's life. As he is approaching Jesus, he is named by the Savior. “I saw you under the fig tree. I knew you before you knew me.”

“Come and see,” the simple invitation of a friend to a friend. Three chapters later Jesus will take a little detour on his journey and find himself at a well in the town of Samaria, or the region of Samaria. There he'll meet a woman, and scripture will record at least a part of their conversation at that well. They'll talk about something called living water, something no one's ever heard of. And she'll say that she knows that the Messiah is coming. She's aware of that, but she's not quite sure when that will happen. And Jesus will declare to her at that well, “I, the one speaking to you, I am he.”

And forgetting the reason why she went to the well that day, leaving her bucket, she will make her way back to her people; and she will say to them, “Come and see. Come and see a man who told me everything about me, everything I ever did.”

She doesn't stay at the well after her experience with Jesus. She doesn't wait for folks to come to the well and then say, “Hey, this other guy gathering water with us, he's the Messiah. He is the savior of the world.” It's not what she does. She drops her pail, and she makes her way back to her people, and she says to her people, “Come and see. Could this one, could this man be indeed the Messiah?”

Beloved, when we have had an experience of the living Christ, we cannot help but share it. The beautiful part of this story to me is that when the woman from the well, and when Philip invites his friend, when...when they tell of their story and their experience, they invite others into the story. “Come and see; come and be a part of it. See if you feel the same way that I feel when I'm in the presence of this Holy One.”

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As Kristin Hangii says, “The resolution of our story, it needs all of us.” And so when we ask ourselves the question of why we invite, that is actually what we need to be thinking about, that we cannot be the people of God separate and apart from one another. Indeed, we need to invite

friends along for the journey. Leave the well, and make our way back to our people. Tell them we've experienced something, and invite them to experience the same.

My favorite professor from Columbia Seminary has a ritual when he travels. Fresca and pretzels. He sits in his main cabin seat, and folks come down the aisle, and he asks for a Fresca and a bag of pretzels. And he likes to lay that one singular square napkin that we get right across the tray table that he's dropped down. And he'll pour out all of his pretzels there, and he'll open his Fresca, and then he'll ask a blessing over the meal that he's going to share. He tells the story of doing this on his way to preach at a church called Second Presbyterian Church in Roanoke, Virginia. It's a great PCUSA church up there. He was heading there to preach, and he got on the plane. He took his seat; and as the stewardess came by, he asked for his Fresca and his pretzels, and he laid it out before him, ready to enjoy his simple meal. He usually eats and then jumps back into sermon preparation on his way to the place where he is going. He tells the story of getting on the plane to Roanoke and doing that. And then he, he bowed his head, and he asked a prayer blessing upon the meal that he was about to share, simple as it was.

And then this woman leaned across the aisle, and she said, “What did you just do?”

And he was startled, and he looked at her blindly.

“Did you just pray?”

“I, yes I did just pray, yep over my Fresca and pretzels, I just prayed.”

“Are you a prayer?”

“Yes, I'm uh, I am a prayer.”

“Are you a pastor? Good, very good. I am making my way to Roanoke because my sister is very sick. I'm going there and I am going to be with my brother-in-law for a good amount of time, and I don't like my brother-in-law. I'd like you to pray for me, please.”

And uh, and my, my favorite Professor is sitting there with his pretzels and his Fresca, and he looked at her, and he said, “I'll be praying for you” and she said, “Now.”

And she reached her hand across the aisle, and he reached his back, startled as he was; and he prayed for, Denise was her name, he prayed for Denise; and he prayed for her to have an open heart. He prayed for her as she went to care for her sister, but for an open heart for her brother-in-law that she didn't like very much.

They deplaned and made their way to baggage claim; and his friend George, the pastor at Second Presbyterian there in Roanoke, met him in the baggage claim. And Denise was right

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there on my favorite professor's hip. And when George came and met him, she said, "Are you a preacher too?"

George, startled like Roger was, says, "Yes, I am." "Well, I told your friend here I'm going to see my sister, who is dying of cancer; and I'm going to be with my brother-in-law, and I don't like him very much. Will you pray for me?" And George was startled, and he said yes; and then she stared at them.

"Now," she said.

So in baggage claim, in the Roanoke Airport, as their bags spun, George and Denise and Roger, they joined hands and they prayed.

Roger went on to preach that Sunday. He stood up in the pulpit at the 11 o'clock service, and in the back row a woman leaned out and waved.

It turns out that in the baggage claim before they had left, George had told Denise, "You know, Roger's preaching at my church, Second Presbyterian Church. You should come, if you'd like to."

It turns out that Denise didn't just attend the service, but she decided to bring her sister Betty along as well, and Tom, even though she didn't like him very much. They sat in the back row that week while Roger preached, and then the next week, and then the next. Betty lived three more months battling cancer, she did. George would send Roger a note just a few months later and let him know that he had gone and visited Betty in her final weeks and days. George, in that note said it was a great honor to accompany Betty in her dying.

And there was a great witness to the resurrection at the Second Presbyterian Church of Roanoke, Virginia, upon her death.

Why do we invite?

It turns out that like Philip, and like the woman at the well, it turns out that this faith that we claim is not meant only for us. This faith is actually meant for all of us. In fact, we cannot resolve the story without everyone being here and being a part of it.

I often hear from Presbyterians, even some amongst our special group of Presbyterians, that we don't want to be too intrusive or too pushy so we hold off from inviting friends or neighbors to come and be a part of this community. I want to offer you a different solution to the problem of coming off a little too Christiany.

Just don't be pushy. Just don't be intrusive.

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You can do it, and you can still be invitational. You can sit with someone across a dinner table or in a living room or in a car on the way to pick up groceries. You can sit with someone on the phone talking with them about life, and then you can say to them, “You know, there's this place that I go at least once a week, or that I join each week virtually, and it, it's been significant for me. I found in this place a place of welcome, a place of inclusion, a place where I get challenged through different formation opportunities and outreach and service opportunities. I found this place, and I'd like to invite you to come and be a part of it.”

You don't have to be intrusive. You don't have to be pushy, but you can still be invitational.

Here's what that means, though. It means that you have to believe, when you're speaking to a friend or a neighbor, that God actually wants something for that person, that beyond you, God actually has a plan for their life too and desires that they have a community to wrestle with the deepest questions of existence with, a community that will pray for them, will walk alongside them in the most difficult parts of life's journey. When we decide to invite, we dare to believe and claim that the Church of Jesus Christ happens to be the best expression of the body of Christ on the face of the earth, that this community, as imperfect as it is, is a beautiful and good and worthwhile reflection of Christ in the world, and because of that, people need to come and be a part of it.

All right, now I'm going to set that aside, and I'm gonna get back in a little bit.

I've heard a handful of times from folks here—and if you're visiting with us for the first time, you can just watch and listen from the outside here for a second—I've heard a couple of different things over the last few months as we have come out of Covid, as we have, and as more people have come into this place. I've heard from folks that I wish more people would come and be a part of a church again on a Sunday morning. I wish they would stop watching online and come. I, I miss people being around me in the pew on a Sunday morning. I hear you. I hear you. Here's also what I know. Our virtual worship is going to be a continual part of who we are as the Church of Jesus Christ henceforth. There will be hundreds of people who will join us as they have for the last several months. They'll join us every single week to worship God together. Do you want to know a way that you can have more people seated beside you in the pews on a Sunday morning? Invite them! And not just church members who don't spend a whole lot of time in Memphis, but friends who have never moved through the doors of this place.

(Sirens sound outside the church) They want us to pay attention here, and the devil's not going to drown out this invitation either. (Sirens pass by.)

Here's the thing. There are people in your orbit that God has put there for a reason, seated beside you on a plane or across the dinner table from you, who will benefit from a community just like this one. This flavor of Christianity that we try to practice here, imperfectly as we do it, there are people who have never experienced a church like Idlewild, who need to know that a church

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like this exists, and we can do one of two things. We can either trust that they're going to someday just wander into these doors, or we can trust and believe that Christ has no body on earth anymore but ours; and, therefore, God has a purpose in giving us a charge to invite.

That maybe, just maybe, that person at work or at school, that person in your bridge club, that person you play tennis with, they might just need an invitation as simple as “come and see.”

Philip didn't say, “Come and see, you’ve got to come every single week.”

The woman at the well didn't get really harsh and intrusive and pushy. She simply was inspiring because she had had an experience of the Living God; and so she went to her people, and she said, “Come and see. Could this be the Messiah?”

So Roger finished up his preaching and teaching responsibilities at Second Pres Roanoke, and he made his way back to the airport, and he walked through baggage claim, and he stopped there, and he prayed in that place. He prayed for Denise and for Betty and for Tom.

And when he took his seat on the plane, he greeted the woman who took her seat right across the aisle from him. And he says that he could feel God's annoyance at him in that seat.

“Roger, I sat her right beside you. She told you that her sister was dying. She told you that she didn't like her brother-in-law. You prayed with her and for her, and it never occurred to you to invite her to worship? It never occurred to you to say, ‘You know it sounds like you have a difficult journey ahead, and there's this community that I know pretty well, and it's full of beautiful and kind and gracious people. And it sounds like you might need a community to be a part of in the weeks and months ahead, and there's probably no better place that you can be on a Sunday morning than Second Presbyterian Church in Roanoke. I'm preaching, and George is a great pastor. Come and see.’”

Seated in that seat of the airplane, heading back to Decatur, he heard the words of Philip echoing in his head. “Come and see, friend. I think we've, we found the one that Moses was talking about.” He heard the words of the Samaritan woman going back to her people. “Come and see. Could he indeed be the Messiah?”

Yes, ma'am. He is Jesus the Christ, the savior of the world. All you have to do is come and see.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all.
Amen.