

Jan. 2020, John 1:29-42 Questions

I am going to be up front about this sermon and tell you right off the bat that I will be using this time to do some sharing about our congregational mission planning process, which began last Monday evening with our first team meeting. The Synod requested that each congregation complete such a process several years ago, hoping all would do so by 2020. And so here we are, towards the end of the deadline, but still within it, in the year of 2020. You might imagine that I am happy to have a chance to participate in a mission planning process and tell you about it during this sermon, but you would be wrong.

Sadly, I am Pastor Bad Attitude when it comes to Mission Planning. Having participated in such processes in numerous congregations, as well as other organizations, my worst fear is that they are laborious painful journeys leading to nowhere. All too often, one ends up with a contrived sounding mission statement and a list of new labor intensive tasks to do that eventually gathers dust in some forgotten corner, to everyone's relief.

(Would you like me to tell you how I really feel?) So, I want to make clear at the outset here that our goal is not to find more things we ought to be doing. Neither I nor anyone on the task force is under the impression that most of us are frittering away our time every day, bored and complacent, reading magazines and eating chocolate, while our church falls into ruin. Quite the contrary! Our congregation is not diminishing, it is in fact, thriving; and the reason it is thriving, is that most of us are heavily invested in resources of not only money, but time, creativity, and emotional energy, in making it thrive. Furthermore, this entire community could be held up as a model of community involvement, so many are not only involved in the church, but in the rec center, in the

hiking trails, in the heritage center, in the Julebyen, and so on. The reason, in fact, in my opinion that we didn't jump on our mission planning process more quickly was because we were too busy doing mission to take the time. But, having gotten all of that off my chest and hopefully having allayed perhaps a concern or two, I am now going to share how it is that my attitude about this mission planning process is becoming more positive. Here's why: it's not about following a regimented pattern to come up with an artificial conclusion and then trying to bully us into taking on more tasks. (Was my bad attitude showing?) It is rather about two things: asking questions and listening. Which is how it relates to our gospel lesson.

There are two questions asked in our Gospel lesson today, one by Jesus, and one by Andrew and another unnamed friend. Jesus asks, "What are you looking for?" And the two men ask, "Where are you staying?" Where are you staying? seems a fairly straight forward question. What are you looking for? not quite so much. It could involve something as simple as looking for the restroom in a restaurant or as complex as looking for meaning in life. Let's think about questions for a moment. Because there are questions and there are questions. There are awkward, loaded questions that should never be asked. Like, "How much weight have you gained since I last saw you?" Or "are you ever going to get married" and so on. There are daily, somewhat inconsequential questions like "what should we have for dinner?" Or "what should we watch on Netflix tonight?" There are questions that have clear and straightforward answers, that we respond to on tests or in filling out forms. But there are also questions that are thought-provoking. That cause us to reflect and ponder, maybe to look at things in a different

way, maybe to come to some new insights and understandings. That's the kind of question "what are you looking for" is, Christ's questions to Andrew and his friend. A question that could even prompt some soul searching. And a question where it is crucial to listen carefully and thoughtfully and non-judgmentally to the response. Two skills that Jesus models so beautifully for us are asking good questions and listening deeply to the response. Which is what we are hoping to do in our mission planning process.

So, our two main mission planning questions are something like this: What do we love about this church? Or if you prefer, what are our current assets, what do we do well, what do we have to work with already? The second question is: are there needs in the church or community we are not meeting? Can we do something differently or better? And we hope that you will answer both of these questions using what Sharon Shelerud calls the Parking Lot approach. You see the tagboards out in the gathering area. They include a place to park your car or place your sticky note in terms of your answers to those questions in regards to specific categories like worship, ministry with children, outreach ministry, and so on. There's a parking lot for the things you love notes, and a parking lot for the suggestions notes. We are sincerely asking these questions and genuinely want to listen carefully to your answers. And not only *your* answers. The model the Synod suggests put forward a three-fold listening: listening to God; to the congregation; and to the community. Where is God leading us? Where is this congregation heading? What needs are there in our community? Three-fold listening. That's what we hope to do, and this parking lot is a start on listening to the congregation. At our next meeting, our group is going to learn more about our *community*

demographics, information we can glean from various online sources using our zip code. Our *congregational* demographics are not so easily mastered, so I'm about to ask your involvement in two simple exercises. I'm curious to know how many of us are newer to this church and how many are longer time members. So, if you have joined or started regularly attending here in the last 10 years, raise your hands. () Ok then. I'm also curious how many of us live within Knife River, proper, and how many of us live outside of Knife River proper. If you live outside of Knife River, raise your hands. () Okay, that's interesting to me. And we may do such little exercises over the next several months just to learn a bit more about ourselves and our community. Because for sure, the worst thing that could happen here is that we might learn something, a risk I believe we are willing to take. Asking questions that matter and listening deeply to the responses. Like Jesus does.

A few thoughts about today, Jan. 15, that may provide an interesting context for our thinking about our Gospel lesson for today:

Today, January 15th, is the final day of the Martin Luther exhibit down at the Minneapolis Institute of Art in the Twin Cities. I don't know if any of you got to see it? If not, it's now probably too late; sorry about that! Phil and I made it down there on New Year's Eve Day. One of the things one realizes when learning about Martin Luther and the Reformation movement of the 16th Century was how unexpectedly *successful* it was. I was reminded of this as I toured the exhibit. Luther just wanted to start a scholarly debate; instead, his ideas spread like wildfire and the church as it was, has never been the same. It's perhaps insightful for us to realize, who can get so caught up in mission statements and proper procedures and effective marketing strategies and so on, that Luther and the Reformation happened more or less accidentally, albeit providentially. But, Luther didn't set out to create Protestant Christianity; he just wanted to start a conversation.

Today, January 15th, is also Martin Luther King Jr. Day, although it will be observed tomorrow. Did you know that this great Baptist preacher and civil rights leader began life as Michael King, Jr? His father, the Rev. Michael King, Sr., named his son after himself, and the boy was known as "Little Mike". Then the Rev. King Sr. went on a

tour with other Baptist pastors that included both sites in the Holy Land and sites relating to the Reformation in Europe. He very likely saw some of the articles that were present at the Minneapolis Art Institute exhibit. He was so moved and inspired by what he saw, by the story of the Reformation, that when he returned home, he changed his name and his son's name: they went from Michael King Sr. and Jr. to Martin Luther King Sr. and Jr. Like his famous predecessor, Martin Luther King Jr. was also a reformer, one whose vision unexpectedly caught fire and helped to bring about significant changes in our country. He could never have anticipated the kind of impact his vision would have; how quickly and intensely it would spread and bring about a radical transformation.

Likewise with the beginnings of Christianity itself, the faith that inspired both Martin Luther and Martin Luther King, Jr. The earliest followers of Jesus, 2000 years ago, didn't necessarily set out to create the institution of the Church as we now know it. There was no marketing strategy, no proper procedures in place, nor even mission statements set out in detail. And yet, against all odds, the movement begun by this Jesus of Nazareth, turned the world upside down and spread to the farthest corners of the earth. It was like a roaring fire that caught the imagination and heart of countless souls. What can we learn from these stories of unlikely beginnings that spread and produced such powerful results? We, who live in a culture in which Christianity and the church are arguably struggling. In contrast, what produced the kind of impact and appeal of Christianity as it began? If we look to our Gospel lesson, we see the beginnings of the formation of the Christian faith. We hear John describe to some of his followers how he baptized Jesus, an event we read of in last week's Scripture lesson. He identifies Jesus to

others as the Lamb of God. The two disciples that followed up on John's words included Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, and another disciple, unnamed. The ensuing introduction of Peter to Jesus *by* Andrew begins the building of the company of the 12 disciples, which leads, remarkably, to the formation of a Christian Church which has spread across the entire planet and continues strong two millennia later. This is an amazing success story. How did it happen?

John the Baptizer is the first to set off the chain of events within this lesson. He does so by simply sharing with two of his followers the experience he'd had previously when he baptized Jesus. Then he points out Jesus to his followers when he sees Jesus coming towards them. He declares, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" Why does he say that?

Christ is referred to as the "lamb of God" numerous times in the New Testament, twice within this very lesson, and we often sing of Christ as the Lamb of God in hymns or liturgy. Let's briefly consider John's assessment of Jesus: Why a *lamb* of God? Why not the lion of God? Or the grizzly bear of God? Wouldn't an animal that commands a little more respect and healthy fear have been a more appropriate image? Why a *lamb*?

Let's just recall a little bit of our Bible history for a moment. If you throw your mind back to 1250 BCE, you will have come to the approximate date of the Exodus event of the Old Testament. The escape of the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt was preceded by 7 plagues which God used to convince the Pharaoh to free the slaves. The final plague was the most terrible. The angel of death was to seek out and kill the first

born son of every Egyptian household. The Hebrew people needed to set their homes apart, so that the Angel of Death would pass over them without harm. Lambs were slaughtered and the doors of the Hebrew's homes were marked by the blood of the lambs. By this means, the angel of death passed over them. Every year, Jews continue to celebrate that event, the Pass-over of the angel of death. Passover is the most important celebration in Judaism, and its most important symbol is the Passover or paschal lamb. It was through the blood of the lamb that the Jews were delivered from the angel of death.

“Behold the lamb of God”, John said to the disciples. The Passover was so central to Judaism and the paschal lamb so central to the Passover, that this phrase would immediately have brought these things to mind for a Jew. John was saying that Jesus was like the Passover lamb. As the death of the paschal lamb delivered the Hebrew people from death over a thousand years earlier, the death of Jesus would deliver *all* people from death. In the Gospel of John, Jesus *is* the final and only Passover lamb—*his* death will deliver *us* from *ours*.

This, then, is John's witness to others, which again sets into motion the beginnings of the Christian faith: he sees Jesus, he perceives him to be the Lamb of God, and he says so to two of his friends and followers. These followers then proceed to follow after Jesus, who turns and speaks to them. It's interesting that *these* are the first words Jesus speaks in the Gospel of John. And these words do not make a statement; they are a question, instead. “What are you looking for?” he asks them. Another translation might be “What do you seek?” He might have instead said, “Why are you following me? What do you want?” But instead he asks a question that has a level of meaning beyond

the surface level: what do you seek? And isn't that a wise and searching question that we might also be asking ourselves and others? What *do* you seek? For what do *you* long? What *are* you looking for? We'd probably each answer differently, wouldn't we? Some of us seek purpose. Some of us seek comfort. Some of us seek challenge. Some of us seek healing. The first words out of the mouth of Jesus in this Gospel are not a declaration telling us what's what; they are a question that prompts some self reflection, some soul searching perhaps: what are you looking for?

This question appears to surprise the two disciples of John. Flustered they respond, "Teacher, where are you staying?" And Jesus now issues an invitation: "Come and see." From John's sharing of what he'd seen, from Jesus's question, and from this open ended invitation the Christian church will be born. And what is the invitation that is offered? "Come and see."

We have this lesson at this time, this Sunday in the season of Epiphany, because the word "epiphany" means "revelation", or "realization". An Epiphany is an insight, a new way of seeing. Epiphanies do not have to be sacred, although they often are. In this season of the church year, our Scripture lessons walk us through a series of epiphanies, of insights into who Jesus is and what he does. The first Gospel Epiphany was the story of the Magi, who followed the star to find and worship Christ. We see from this story that Jesus is not merely the Jewish messiah born for Jews, like those shepherds in the nearby field of his birth; but he is also the Savior of the world, sought out and worshiped by these exotic magi from the east, who were most certainly not Jewish.

The next Epiphany was Jesus' baptism, which we focused on last Sunday. We see in this story that Jesus is affirmed as God's beloved Son and is empowered by the Holy Spirit.

This lesson today continues the theme of seeing, of revelation, of learning more about who Jesus is. We learn that he is the Lamb of God, with all that involves in relation to forgiveness and deliverance. And we learn that Jesus begins his ministry with a question that invites some self-reflection: What are you seeking? Finally, we learn that Jesus began the movement that became the Christian church with the simple invitation, "Come and see."

I think this is a liberating and provocative insight for those of us who feel badly about the decline of the Church in our place and time, and yet find ourselves tongue tied and not very competent when it comes to sharing our faith. Certainly evangelism is not a popular word or activity for most mainstream Christians, including Lutherans. This may be partly because of the type of evangelism we tend to think of: television evangelists or overbearing relatives. There is a tendency for us to imagine that sharing our faith involves saying things that seem awkward, intrusive, or even judgmental. Wanting to avoid such follies, we generally tend to simply fall into silence. As Pastor and Professor David Lose writes about the *silence* of mainstream Christianity in light of this text: "If you really want to understand why the church is declining in North America, you need to recognize how frightened most of our people are by the word "evangelism." For some, it comes from being on the receiving end of someone else's evangelism. Whether asked "Have you accepted Jesus?" by a domineering brother-in-law or "Do you know where

you're going when you die?" by a well-meaning but intense co-worker, too many folks have experienced evangelism as coercive, even threatening.

For others, the explanation isn't nearly as sinister. It may be a conviction that religion isn't something polite people talk about; or that one's faith is private; or simply the desire not to be perceived as one of *those* people (you know, the kind we just described)."

Silence, then, becomes our default position, yet it's obvious that silence has not been effective in bearing witness, even as we shy away from these stereotypical evangelism methods. But, look at our text! Jesus doesn't model an outreach *method* at all, and certainly not one which is intrusive, judgmental, or awkward. Like Martin Luther or Martin Luther King Jr., he looks to start a conversation. He asks a question. He extends an invitation. And what kind of invitation does he extend? One that is simple and gracious, that makes no assumptions. He doesn't, for example, say, "Come and be saved." Or even, "Come and let me fix you." And of course, he doesn't say anything even remotely like: "Come and think like we do." "Come and vote like we do." "Come and give us some money." "Come and bolster up our attendance figures." I do not hear Jesus saying any of those things, by way of invitation. So, if we, or other Christians, make those kinds of statements and call them invitational evangelism, we are *not* standing in the tradition of our Lord, who simply said, "Come and see."

Could we say that? To someone? Come and see? Come and see our church some time, it's a great place. Come and see our beautiful Memorial Garden, it's unique. Come and see what our worship is like, it's inspiring. Come and see what our quilting group or

our bell choir or our fishcake dinner or our Lenten Study group is like. No sales pitch. No implication that they are wrong or lacking, while you are right and perfect. Just something like—"I think this is wonderful, you should come and see it sometime." And then you trust God to be God and let the Spirit take it from there. Because if we think *we* are going to convert anyone or change anyone's heart, we're crazy! That's the work of the Spirit, and we would be wise to get out of God's way. We have a crucial part to play, certainly; perhaps in thinking through those searching questions—what are looking for?—, and definitely in extending gracious hospitality and invitation. But when it comes to change and redemption, that's where God does the heavy lifting. The Lamb of God delivers from sin, death, and the devil. Not us. Maybe that realization might free us to be more open and invitational about our faith. All Jesus said was, "Come and see." And that invitation changed the world. Amen.