Sermon for the 2nd Sunday after the Epiphany Year B

Jesus says “Follow me” to Philip; Philip tells Nathaniel

It’s hard to believe that just a few weeks ago, we were celebrating the birth of a child and reflecting on what that means for us and for our world.

Suddenly, we’re talking about Jesus all grown up and heading out into the world to do what he was meant to do – to tell us of God’s saving grace – to call us to him and to show us what it means to be disciples.

Today’s gospel, and the other readings, remind us of a few very important things about being disciples.

The first point is quick and easy to miss. John starts his story by telling us that “Jesus found Philip”. The truth at the heart of our Christian story is not that you and I have found Christ but that Christ has found us. The word “found” tells us that Jesus is actually actively searching us out. Jesus “found” Philip – Jesus didn’t come across him by chance. Jesus doesn’t come across us by chance. Jesus is actively searching out our hearts and minds to let us know he is there. So, rather than saying, “I’ve found Jesus” or “I’ve come to Jesus” like many do when they realize they believe in God, it would be much more accurate to say that we become aware of his presence within us. God created us. He is with us. Our psalm this morning begins with “you have searched me out and known me.” We didn’t choose God. God chose us. Paul writes in Ephesians 1:4: “For he chose us in him before the creation of the world...” God is there waiting for us to notice.

The second very important point is also brief and could be easily missed. Jesus says two words to Philip: “Follow me.” Put Jesus first. That is what is demanded of us as Christians. We don’t have to literally leave behind our family, friends, jobs, and possessions like Philip did but we do need to put them in 2nd place. Jesus is first in our lives and then everything trickles down from there – the way we love our families, the way we treat our co-workers or friends, everything we do has Jesus as the hinge and is so much more joyful because of that. We can’t keep any part of our lives from God and why would we want to? “You have searched me out and known me.” We can’t section Jesus off as one part of our lives and try to live the other parts without him and still be a follower of Christ. When Jesus says “Follow me” there is no escape clause written into the contract. He is Lord of all, or not at all. Following Jesus is a commitment that involves every last little bit of our beings.

The next thing we notice is the first thing Philip does once he’s called. Does he join a church? Get baptized? Go on a spiritual retreat? No. The first thing Philip does after Jesus calls him is to tell his brother Nathaniel about him. Our first job as disciples is to tell others about Jesus. We often think that we’re not capable of talking to others about Jesus because we don’t know enough or don’t know our bibles well enough to back up what we’re saying. Well, Philip didn’t have theological training either. He was just like us. We have our love for Jesus. We just need to get started and Jesus will take care of the rest. That doesn’t mean that we need to stand on a street corner and proclaim the gospel but we need to do small things that say to people that we’re followers of Christ. A number of years ago, I started pushing myself out of my comfort zone by doing small things I hadn’t been able to do before. Something like being able to say to our friends, “I’ll pray for that person” when we’re told someone is ill or in the hospital for some reason. Something like saying, when you’re invited out somewhere else, “Sorry I can’t join you – I go to church at that time”. When I worked as a teacher, I had a prayer for patience taped to my computer. It was for me but others could clearly see it and it quietly proclaimed that I believe in God. The people who know me, know that I’m a Christian and that my faith is a natural part of my life. I found that when I started being more vocal and more obvious about having faith in God, people began bringing up the subject of God with me and asking me questions.

The historian Josephus, who lived in the first century just like Jesus and his disciples did, wrote about Jesus and the early Christians. Josephus marveled at the lifestyle of the early Christians – it amazed him that they cared not only for one another but also for the people around them. They were loving, kind, and generous as a community. In those early years, the followers of Christianity nearly doubled with every passing decade. That’s phenomenal. I was recently told that, in our time of decreasing church membership, we are not asking quite the right question. Instead of asking how we can attract people into our buildings, we need to be asking how we can be attractive. There’s a small but important difference in that wording. The early Christians were clearly very attractive to the people around them. In the writings of every major early Christian figure, we find them saying the same thing...they urged Christians to behave visibly differently than the rest of society around them. Christians demonstrate the gospel by living the gospel. During that early time of the church, Christians did not speak to others about their faith and outsiders were not even allowed into the Christian worship services. Christians were afraid that they would be reported and then arrested. But the church grew. The church grew because Christians acted like Christians in their communities and that attracted people.

So, to sum up the important points so far: Jesus searches us out and finds us, not the other way around. Jesus calls us to put him first in our lives. He requires that we tell other people about him by living lives that speak volumes.

The reading about Samuel this morning (1 Sam.3) mentions that “the voice of the LORD was rare in those days” and, to me, that sounds just like today. The voice of the LORD seems to be rare today but...perhaps...God’s voice is not rare. Maybe we are not listening for it. A lot of people seem to have forgotten about God, even those who do believe in God don’t give God a lot of thought throughout their busy days. But the reading in Samuel reminds us that the voice of God is out there speaking to us. Jesus searches us out and finds us. Come and see.