

January 22, 2023 Third Sunday after Epiphany

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

Genesis 12:1-4, John 1:35-51

"Gerunds of the Church: Inviting"

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She sighed as she sorted through the mail for the day; catalog after catalog of things she neither needed nor wanted; an occasional bill she had already paid online. She was about to drop the whole mess into the recycling bin when a thick and heavy envelope slid out of the pile and hit the floor with a resounding thunk. The envelope was square and large and the color of glistening pale gold. It nearly shimmered as it rested on the hardwood floor. She dropped everything else in the bin and picked up the envelope. Her name and address were hand-written in calligraphy. She could not remember the last time she had gotten anything of consequence or interest in the mail. She slid her fingernail under the back flap with a mixture of curiosity and expectation. "You have been cordially invited to an elegant soiree." A time, date, and location were listed and nothing else. She had not been to a party of any kind since before COVID. Lately, she generally preferred a quiet evening at home by herself. But this invitation was just too intriguing.

Today is the first in the four part sermon series, "The Gerunds of the Church." We will be looking at how the church is called to embody the gospel. This morning we will be considering how inviting is an essential element of being the church. Our two scripture texts this morning both include

invitations. Abram, soon to be Abraham, is invited by God to leave behind all he knows and is promised he will be the father of a great nation. In our text from John we hear Jesus inviting two of John the Baptist's disciples to "Come and see." And then we hear Philip invite Nathanael to "Come and see."

The biblical narrative is full of invitations. And I am continually struck by how open-ended they are. Abram is told he will become a great nation but other than leaving behind all that he knows, the details are kind of sketchy. The invitations that Jesus and Philip make are a little open-ended as well. They announce, "Come and see" but exactly what will be seen is up for some debate. If we want to learn more we have to accept the invitation and see what the journey has to reveal to us.

If we step back and look at the entire first chapter of the gospel of John we discover a stark juxtaposition. As we know, the beginning of the chapter is imbued with lofty language. Jesus is envisioned in elegant, abstract, metaphysical terms. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being..." And on the words flow, painting an evocative portrait that pushes the boundaries of our collective imagination. It is a view of Jesus Christ from ten thousand feet in the air.

The second half of this chapter takes us all the way down to ground level, to the dusty streets of ancient Palestine. We get these very human interactions between Jesus and John's disciples, and Jesus and Philip, and Philip and Nathanael. We get conversations. Jesus gives no high falutin' description of who he is as the Son of God or a detailed itinerary of the

journey. What does he do? He says, "Come and see." He proffers an invitation. And Philip mirrors this strategy with Nathanael, "Come and see."

I revel in all of the elegant metaphysical language that provides a powerful prelude to the narrative of Jesus' life. But if that is all we had to comprehend who Jesus Christ is I fear our understanding would be rather hollow. Our understanding of who Jesus is becomes three dimensional and vivid and tangible by learning the stories of his mortal life. We need the stories of Jesus teaching, and healing, and weeping, getting angry and needing time alone, celebrating and grieving. We need all of this to begin to understand who Jesus truly is.

And that is exactly why Jesus does not give a long theological exposition. "Do you want to know who I am? Come and see! Share the journey. It is the only way you can possibly understand who I am." We, the church, are called to be in the inviting business as well. We are called to be a reflection of the inviting nature of our God.

Many people will say they are spiritual and not religious, in other words they do not find a need to explore their understanding of God in community. They are happy to figure it out on their own. I cannot speak for other faith traditions but that does not work all that well for those who seek to be Christians. The very basis of our faith is incarnational. We believe God took on flesh and lived among us. We not only need the stories of Jesus' human life to help us grow in our understanding and faithfulness. We need each other. We need each other's stories. We need to be in community. Our incarnational faith only makes sense when it is explored

incarnationally, in other words, together, in the flesh, with all those who are physically able to do so.

For the church to be the church, we need to be bodies gathered together, sharing the journey, worshiping and learning together, sharing fellowship and serving together. And for us to do things together we need to be inviting. We need to be inviting those who have never been to Ladue Chapel to "Come and See." We need to be inviting those who used to be involved before the pandemic but have yet to return to "Come and See." We need to be inviting each other, even those of us who are here quite often, to "Come and See." Perhaps that means inviting someone who comes to worship all the time to come and see what the Day of Service or the Arts and Faith Weekend is like. Or inviting someone who has never attended a Bible Study or Lectio Divina to come and see what those experiences are like. We need each other to be followers of Jesus Christ. And if we need each other, we must invite each other. Everyone can use a gracious invitation.

Sociologists are telling us that one of the effects of the pandemic is that a good number of folks have lost connection to communities that were once important to them. We have certainly experienced that in the church. When I speak to clergy colleagues across the country they all share stories of once active members who have yet to return to the community life of the church. They have created new routines and fallen out of the habit of engaging with the church in person.

The way to be a follower of Jesus Christ, the Son of God who chose to step fully into our mortal, human form, is to journey with other humans. And the best way we can do that is by inviting others to join us.

In the film, *Glengarry Glen Ross*, there is an infamous scene in which a character played by Alec Baldwin comes in to motivate an office of real estate salesman. He vociferously and aggressively challenges them to make more sales. If you have seen the movie you remember when he infamously berates Jack Lemon's character as Jack get up and heads for the coffeemaker. He barks out, "Coffee is for closers!" In the midst of his tirade he flips a blackboard around to reveal the letters, A, B, C, "Always Be Closing." When you are in sales you need to always be closing. When we are members of a church we are called to A, B, I, always be inviting.

We do not need to be aggressive evangelists. We need to be people that wish to generously share what is wonderful about this family of faith with others. "Come and See."

Every day our God is inviting us into closer relationship. We too are called to invite others into relationship with this community of faith. Our inviting does not need to come in a fancy, glistening gold envelope. Our inviting does not need to come with promises of exactly where the journey will lead, that is in God's hands. All we need to do is speak with others about how important this church is for us; how important our journey of faith in this place is for us; and how we would like to share it.

Maybe the invitation is just what someone who has never been here before needs right now. Maybe the invitation is just what someone who used to be here and has not been for a long time needs right now.

Today as we ordain and install officers, they will stand before us as people who have accepted an invitation. They have chosen to join in the journey of leadership of this Body of

Christ. In accepting this invitation they do not know the twist and turns that await them as they serve. But they do know with whom they will be traveling, with each other, and with our God, in Jesus Christ. And in the end that is all any of us really need to know.

There is an invitation out there for each and every one us to receive and to offer. "Come and See." "Come and See." "Come and See."

And, oh, by the way, in a few minutes as you head to that coffee urn in the Gathering Place, remember, coffee is for inviters.

Thanks be to God. Amen.