

John 1:43-51 Pastor Bill Uetricht 2 Epiphany 1/17/21

I know it's hard to believe, but I can remember way back in the 1980s when I was at seminary and I heard a sermon preached by the well-known Joseph Sittler. Sittler was speaking to idealistic seminary graduates who probably were taken a little by their ideas and dreams for the church, who were ready in some ways to go out and conquer the world and the church. Sittler didn't arm these graduates and the rest of us who were listening with a long list of "how-to's," helpful hints for how you make the church what you want it to be. He simply said, "Don't forget the *haunting allure* of Jesus."

Wow! I haven't forgotten those words. I still remember them after all these years. There is something about Jesus that is alluring, that we can't get away from, that even haunts us. I can't help but think that whenever I read the call stories in the gospels. And it's a call story that we have in the gospel lesson from John today.

Jesus, with great intention, it seems, has gone into Galilee, an area known for having people from a wide variety of backgrounds. There he *finds* Philip. (Philip doesn't *find* Jesus, at least initially.) The name "Philip" indicates that he likely has some Greek origins. Well, this newly found disciple finds another disciple, Nathanael. The name Nathanael is a consummate Jewish name. So already in John we have the coming together of Jews and Gentiles, the whole world.

While Philip finds Nathanael for the Jesus movement, Nathanael doesn't seem overly enamored with the prospect of following this Jesus guy. He says something prejudicial about Jesus' origins: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Nazareth was thought to be a hick town. How can somebody who comes from such a no-name, uneducated place be worth following?

Philip, who is clearly taken by the allure of Jesus, doesn't engage in a defensive rebuttal against Nathanael's idiocy. (Perhaps we who

spend a lot of time arguing in regular conversation or on Facebook might learn something from this.) No, Philip simply says, “Come and see.” Come and see that something really big, something important, something life-giving is coming out of Nazareth. I am so taken by that something, that someone, that all I can say is, “Come and check it out. Come and experience it.”

Well, Jesus doesn't seem overly bothered by Nathanael's prejudice. If I had been him, I would have said, “This surely isn't the guy we want in our club.” (Perhaps we who live in a culture of offense, where so many people seem offended about everything, could learn something profound from this.) Jesus quickly moves from Nathanael's offensive statement to a claim in which he affirms Nathanael as the consummate Israelite. “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” I don't know. This Jesus guy is weird. He sees in people what we don't see and what we don't see in ourselves.

Actually, Nathanael doesn't understand Jesus' compliment of him. “How do you know this about me?” he asks. “Where did you get to know me?” Jesus *already* knows Nathanael. “I saw you, before Philip called you, acting like a rabbi, studying the Torah under the fig tree.” Nathanael is not only found; he is known. There is a haunting allure about Jesus who knows us.

Our Psalm for today is all about being known. “O Lord, you have searched me and known me...Even before a word is on my tongue, you know it completely. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.”

To be drawn into the allure of Jesus is to be drawn into the haunting and yet gracious reality that you can't hide. You may think that you can run, even from yourself, but you cannot hide. You can't run from the truth that you are wonderfully and fearfully made, that

even your inward parts were formed by the God who created and loved. And you also cannot run from your lies. They will find you.

It is being known that causes Nathanael to say to Jesus, “You are the Son of God! You are the king of Israel.” To follow Jesus is not to hold up a sign in a crowd that says, “Jesus saves.” That is cheap and probably represents an attempt to further run from so much that is plaguing you. To follow Jesus is to be taken in to the haunting allure of Jesus, the one who finds you, the one who knows you, and the one who, nonetheless, loves you, calling you to his higher purposes.

What is the “haunting allure” of Jesus? It’s love. It’s love that is seeking you. It is love that is after you and wants to place you inside of a beloved community, as Martin Luther King called it. After all, God so *loved* the world that he gave his only son. It’s love that allures you. It is love that haunts you. It’s love that hems you in and lays its hand on you. It’s love that calls and is your calling.

And the latter is really Paul’s point in our second reading for today. He’s quoting some folks who are a part of the Corinthian community when he says, “All things are lawful to me.” This was a saying they were tossing around, building on what Paul’s teaching meant regarding the great freedom that we have in Christ. “We’re free. We can do whatever we want, right Paul? And what they wanted, evidently is, as the rest of the reading reveals, visiting prostitutes at the local pagan temple.

Paul, I am sure, feels used at this point. And he says, “All things [may be] lawful to me, but not all things are beneficial.” The freedom that Paul has been preaching is about giving in to the haunting allure of love, not about doing whatever you darn well please, or saying whatever you darn well want to. There is a shape to our freedom, Paul is arguing. And that shape is called love. Doing whatever you darn well want to or saying whatever you darn well please is not the love that is

hauntingly alluring us. It is self-centeredness, narcissism, the psychologists call it.

We live in a land that rightfully prides itself in our emphasis on freedom and the practices of freedom. But sometimes we misunderstand what freedom means, especially for those who follow Jesus, who give in to his haunting allure. What we saw at the Capitol last week, what we regularly hear from political leaders, what we have experienced as we have been negotiating the pandemic too often is not love, but self-preoccupation that says I am free to do whatever I want.

Hear this and hear it clearly. You as a Christian are not free to do whatever you want. Violence is not the way of Jesus. Crass, caustic, ugly, incendiary words are not the way of Jesus. Trust me. They sometimes come to my mind. And sometimes I want to just speak what's on my mind. And sometimes I just want to swim in my hatred and anger and invite others into that pool. And sometimes I want to dwell in the enmity that I have for people whom I can't stand. And sometimes I want to never talk to my wife again after she said something that really ticked me off. (And by the way, that hasn't happened too often lately.) But Jesus haunts me. The allure of his life stops me, changes me, makes me think about somebody other than myself. He has led me into a beloved community. And he drives me to make sure that it is a beloved community, not a collection of private individuals, that we will build.

Love is haunting us. Love is alluring you and me. Come and see. Give in and follow love!