

Epiphany 2  
January 14, 2018  
Christ the King  
Kenner

***A Hard Sell***

Text: John 1:43-51

Nathanael was a hard sell, as we just heard. He wasn't going to pick up and follow Jesus just because Andrew and Peter had, or because Philip told him he should also. No, not so fast, Nathanael said.

Years ago I knew a man who reminded me a lot of Nathanael. His name was John and he was a chemistry professor at the university. In fact, he was the only chemistry professor there who wasn't a member of my congregation, although his wife and two children were. When John met his wife in graduate school and they decided to marry, she talked him into attending adult instruction classes at the local Lutheran church. It only took one session for him to decide he wasn't going back. That was 20 years before I met him.

And yet he faithfully attended church every week with his wife and children. I say children, but their son was president of the student body at Oberlin College and their daughter a student at Julliard. A very bright family, including John who had a reputation for not suffering fools gladly.

He attended church every week (that's my favorite kind of non-member), but he wouldn't commune. Instead he remained seated in the pew when his wife and their kids, when home on vacation, went forward to receive the sacrament.

Then one fall, right after classes had started up again at the university, I offered a twelve week long Adult Information Class. John saw the invitation in the bulletin and made an appointment to talk with me. When we met he told

me that although he had walked out on a similar class 20 years ago, he thought he'd give it another try on one condition: that I would keep it a secret from his family. And when the class began, we swore all the others in the group to secrecy also.

Well it's a class I'll never forget, because all John's questions and concerns about the Christian faith and about the Lutheran Church made what was normally just 12 weekly meetings stretch out to six full months. We began in the fall and ended just before Easter. And then, on Easter Sunday, when his wife and children got up to come forward for communion, John astonished them all by coming with them. And he was confirmed the following week.

So whenever I hear or read today's Gospel about Nathanael and his initial skepticism, I think of John.

I suspect some of you were also hard sells, and came to faith only after many questions and doubts; and maybe some of you are still struggling with Christian faith itself. Although that's pretty common.

But, it's one thing to believe, as Nathanael puts it, that Jesus is the Son of God and King of Israel - that's faith, and it is a gift of the Holy Spirit. But it's quite another thing, I think you'll agree, to actually follow him in active discipleship. For Nathanael, coming to faith was just the beginning. He would spend the next three years following Jesus, eventually up to Jerusalem where, as Jesus told him, "you will see greater things than these; you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

And it's true for us as well when we follow Jesus' lead. Because when we get up from the communion rail and exit worship we have no idea where the Lord may take us.

Our last hymn today is one that most of us really enjoy singing. "Here I am Lord. Is it I, Lord? I have heard you calling in the night. I will go, Lord, if you lead me. I will hold your people in my heart."

It's based on today's First Reading which describes the call of Samuel, who was awakened three times during the night by the voice of God calling out his name. The passage tells us that "Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him." So Eli told Samuel to go, lie down, and if he calls you again, say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

And sure enough, God did call to him again, and when Samuel answered, God, he was set upon a life-long mission.

Well, we sing that hymn, echoing Samuel's words, because we have also been called by name at our baptisms, and set by God upon life-long missions as his servants. We are called, marked with the cross of Christ and commissioned for service as we follow his lead.

We commemorated Epiphany, the visit of the wise-men to the infant Jesus, last Sunday, which was actually the First Sunday after Epiphany on which the church usually reflects on the Baptism of our Lord. If we had done that we would have heard how the Holy Spirit descended upon him at his baptism and a voice - the same voice which called Samuel into ministry centuries earlier -

the voice this time over Jesus said, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And with that, Jesus began his earthly ministry which took him to the cross on our behalf, and finally out of the tomb.

All of us, like Samuel, like Nathanael, and even a bit like Jesus, are also called to service by God who assures us that we are his beloved daughters and sons.

We can only serve, however, by praying for and following the Lord's guidance. Which is what we do in the Prayer for the Day, in which we say, "Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus Christ, most merciful redeemer, for the countless blessings and benefits you give. May we know you more clearly, love you more dearly, and follow you more nearly, day by day, praising you, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever."

Does something in that prayer sound familiar. Sounds like a song right out of the musical "Godspell," doesn't it.

I invite you to end this sermon by singing it with me, if you know it, Ready?

"Day by day, day by day. Oh, dear Lord, three things I pray: To see thee more clearly, love the more dearly, follow the more nearly day by day." Again?