

“UNLIKELY CANDIDATES”
John 1:39-47
Second Sunday in Epiphany

Jesus chose his disciples from the most unlikely pool of candidates. Men without pedigree, without religious status, men without means. His selections confuse us, but they also connect us to Christ. Hear what the Spirit is saying to his 21st century disciples in John 1, beginning with the 35th verse:

The next day [following the Baptism of Jesus], John was back at his post with two disciples, who were watching. He looked up, saw Jesus walking nearby, and said, “Here he is, God’s Passover Lamb.”

The two disciples heard him and went after Jesus. Jesus looked over his shoulder and said to them, “What are you after?”

They said, “Rabbi” (which means “Teacher”), “where are you staying?”

He replied, “Come along and see for yourself.”

They came, saw where he was living, and ended up staying with him for the day. It was late afternoon when this happened.

Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, was one of the two who heard John’s witness and followed Jesus. The first thing he did after finding where Jesus lived was find his own brother, Simon, telling him, “We’ve found the Messiah” (that is, “Christ”). He immediately led him to Jesus.

Jesus took one look up and said, “You’re John’s son, Simon? From now on your name is (or Peter” (which means “Rock”).

Here ends the lesson. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.

Three hundred miles north of Jerusalem is Antioch, where Matthew lived and wrote his gospel. North from Antioch and west, 800 miles along the Mediterranean Sea to what is now the western shore of Turkey, was the ancient city of Ephesus, where Paul lived and evangelized in the 50s and where John penned his gospel around the year 100.

Matthew's target audience was the Messianic Jews and the remnant Pharisees, following the destruction by Rome of the Jerusalem Temple and Jewish culture in the year 70.

John was also Jewish, but by the time he wrote his gospel, he had given up Judaism completely, calling himself "Christian" and following solely what he understood to be Jesus' teachings and example. Paul created a solid community of Christ-followers in Ephesus some 40-50 years earlier. One of his students wrote a letter to the Ephesians in Paul's name as a tribute to the early Christian community Paul established there. The letter is evangelical in nature, calling the community of Ephesians, by the cultural standards of the day, to obedience and right living in Christ's name.

The letter has a beautiful passage about call. The author writes:

That's why, when I heard of the solid trust you have in the Master Jesus and your outpouring of love to all the followers of Jesus, I couldn't stop thanking God for you—every time I prayed, I'd think of you and give thanks. But I do more than thank. I ask-ask the God of our Master, Jesus Christ, the God of glory—to make you intelligent and discerning in knowing him personally, your eyes focused and clear, so that you can see exactly what he is calling you to do, and grasp the immensity of this glorious way of life he has for his followers, of the utter extravagance of his work in us who trust him—endless energy, boundless strength!

This writing coming out of Ephesus is very different from Matthew's writing from Antioch. As I taught you last week, Matthew is writing in the shadow of trauma and grief following the Temple's destruction. His writing is urgent; his metaphor is the mountain. Matthew is rallying the survivors and new believers, assuring them of God's steadfast love and strength.

John and Pseudo-Paul are both writing from Ephesus. The city has a diverse population with many well-traveled citizens, no religious persecution, and highly skilled religious teachers. John's metaphor, the garden, is easily understood within his context. His intellectual and spiritual life is rich with many varieties of creative expression. Exotic, colorful flowers, tall and strong trees bearing the wisdom of the ages, cool flowing grasses inviting those walking to sit awhile in their softness—these are all the images of John's writing.

John beckons his audience to take their time in understanding God. He ushers his readers into the livingroom of Jesus, offering teas and cakes while they listen to the Beloved One teach them directly and passionately from his heart.

John has made peace with his Jewish heritage, leaving it behind for Christianity. As such, he is frequently misunderstood as being anti-Semitic, but in truth, he is not. He is informed by his ancestors in faith, but he is frustrated with the Pharisees who do not accept Jesus in the same way he does.

This is how he differs from Matthew, who believes that Jesus is the Messiah that has come to fulfill the Jewish prophecies. In stark contrast to Matthew, John believes that the path of Jesus the Christ is superior to the Judaism of his day and he freely expresses that theology in his writing. John is a fervent evangelist who sees that his job is to enlighten the people of Ephesus and to advocate for the Beloved Messiah who has come.

By the time that John is penning his gospel, the Ephesian Christian community is growing from a rich assortment of religious backgrounds—Jews, pagans, and those finding religion for the first time in their lives all have banded together to form a distinctly new faith. They self-identify as “Christians” and their place of worship as the “New Jerusalem.”

You might say they are multi-tribal. “They [do] not regard Jesus as the Jewish Messiah who had come only for the Jews. They [follow] a universal Christ who had come, died, and been resurrected for all.” (Shaia, *Heart and Mind*, 188).

Their rite of baptism more closely approximates our own. Rather than the ritual cleansing that Matthew writes about, this new community transforms baptism into a process of initiation that joins the individual with Jesus the Christ and his believers. Called to be Christian, those seeking baptism –men and women alike- are required to spend an extended, intentional period in prayer, discernment, and deep Christian practice, including months of service to the community, before they will be accepted. This is not unlike our post-modern practice of ordination preparation. The Christian community being “pledged” was very careful about who would be let in. This was because outsiders who had previously worshipped deities and gods and practiced allegiance to them, were in need of indoctrination in their new Christian faith, but also because they pose a very real threat to the health and safety of the practicing community, its harmony and sustainability.

John changes all that. In his view, everyone is welcome in the new Garden of Eden, in the new practice of Christianity. Through Christ, Paradise is now recovered for all people! Alexander John Shaia teaches this about John’s impact on late first-century Christian practice and belief:

This reshaped garden of Christianity *welcomes* people rather than casting them out. It doesn't consider them usurpers of the divine; rather, it invites them to share in its bounty and beauty. In this way, John illuminates the new faith to his diverse audience. It would be familiar to the Jewish Christ followers who already knew these stories, but it would also be [understood] and welcoming to newcomers. (191)

Enter Andrew and Simon Peter, peasants without religious training beyond what they might have learned at home. We know they are Jewish, because they ask Jesus if he is a Rabbi, a Jewish teacher. Jesus asks them a crucial question and follows the question with an equally compelling invitation:

"What are you looking for?" Jesus asks the men who were following John as disciples, but who are now following him. That is the first question of "call." We are called to Christ when we are looking for something that has gone missing in our lives.

When around toddler children, do you notice that they love without reservation? They reach their hands out for a hug or to be lifted up and held. They seek love and they give love freely. When they are distressed, they reach out again, trusting us, needing us to respond with love and comfort.

Along life's way, we teach our children to be self-sufficient. Other children or frustrated parents might call them a "crybaby" if, no longer a toddler's age and maturity, they reach out for comfort. They learn to pull back, to pull inward, to be less trusting and less transparent about their love.

For many people, what goes missing is the innate, natural feeling that God loves us just as we are, that we are already enough for God. Self-judgment, self-hatred, and self-monitoring takes the place of self-love, self-compassion, and free expression. "I am ugly. I am old. I am stupid. I am fat. I am not a good friend. I

am unlovable; I am a nobody. I am mentally unsound. I am not a good spouse. I am not a good Christian. I am a horrible parent. I am incapable, and incapable of change.” The self-talk goes on and on, chipping steadily away at our sense of worth.

We go *looking*, looking for that which has been lost. Andrew and Simon Peter go looking. Likely they are plagued with our same sense of loss and loneliness, too, that something profound is missing from their lives.

“*What are you looking for?*” Jesus asks them; we ask ourselves.

I had a fantastic career in law, more money than was reasonable, respect of my peers and community, a solid marriage, and relatively good health. I didn’t even know something had gone missing until Spirit asked me, “*What are you looking for?*”

I had no answer, I couldn’t even croak out the word, *Teacher*, as did Andrew and Peter. I was as unlikely a candidate for call as the two peasants in John’s gospel.

“*What are you looking for?*” Jesus asks us. This is the question of call. Next comes his invitation:

“*Come and see,*” he says to them. Come and see what you have been missing and what I can provide you. It is the dance that follows the hand outstretched in supplication. It is the impulsive act that follows the call.

May 19, 2005, out of a dead sleep I woke up, certain that God had just spoken to me. It was as though God-alive was challenging me, asking me, “*What has gone missing? What are you looking for?*”

Well, I might have smugly replied, “I didn’t know *anything* was missing! I’m not looking for *anything at all!*” But what I heard was, “*Come and see. Come and see how to change your life for me.*”

An unlikely candidate was I. Not religious, not particularly spiritual, not a churchgoer, not a student of Jesus or the Bible, that was me. Anne Lamott is one of my favorite theological, non-conforming, in-your-face, down to earth writers. This is what she says about all of us unlikely candidate disciples:

You’ve got to love this in a God—consistently assembling the motleyest people to bring, into the lonely and frightening world, a commitment to care and community. It’s a centuries-long reality show—Moses the stutterer, Rahab the prostitute, David the adulterer, Mary the homeless teenager. Not to mention all the mealy-mouthed disciples. Not to mention a raging insecure narcissist like me. (*Plan B: Further Thoughts on Life*, 2005, 22)

Just like me. Just like you, too. That’s how it comes, as a realization that Spirit is reaching into your very soul and massaging your heart muscle. You get an inkling. You get an inkling and it is confirmed by someone or something else you can’t rationalize away. It grabs you and it doesn’t let go. And if you are the unlikeliest of candidates, the grip is even harder, the inkling even more profound, the invitation even more enticing!

So, what are you looking for?

“*Come and see*”, he says. John’s Christ invites you into the Garden of Plenty, the New Garden of Eden, there to tarry awhile while you have the most delicious, most profound, most moving inner discussion with Spirit-Within-You. Make no mistake about it. Everyone in this room (or reading these words) is THE

most Unlikely Candidate for Disciple, and everyone one here is being called to “*Come and see*” what God-alive has in store for us.

I love Teresa of Avila’s summation of call and sending forth. She was a sixteenth century Spanish mystic who wrote of her ecstatic experiences of God and Christ. This is what she calls out to us, the Beloved Unlikely Candidates five centuries hence:

*Christ has no body now on earth but yours,
no hands but yours,
no feet but yours.*

*Yours are the eyes through which to look out
Christ’s compassion to the world;*

*Yours are the feet with which he is to go about
doing good;*

Yours are the hands with which he is to bless [humankind] now.

“*What are you looking for?*” he asks us.

“*Come and see,*” he calls to us. Hmmm.....

May It Be So.