

1.18.26 Sermon on John 1:29-42

One of my favorite things as a kid was getting an invitation to someone's birthday party. It always led to such excitement and anticipation. What would we do? What games would we play? And the most important question, then and now, what kind of cake would we eat? But the thing about an invitation is that it is only that. An invitation. You still have to show up in order to actually experience the thing itself! You have to come and see.

In John's Gospel, Jesus doesn't begin with a lecture, or a creed. He doesn't begin with a list of rules, or even a sermon. Jesus begins with an invitation. There are two disciples of John who see Jesus and start following him – kind of awkwardly and uncertainly, people who aren't even quite sure what they want to know yet. And then Jesus turns around and asks them the first question of discipleship: "What are you looking for?" What are you seeking? What are you chasing? What do you think will save you?

They respond with a question of their own: "Rabbi, where are you staying?" Where and with whom can we find you?

And Jesus says: "Come and see." This is the invitation at the heart of discipleship. Jesus invites those first disciples and also us to find out what he is up to. It's the first invitation Jesus gives in John's Gospel, and it becomes something of a refrain, of a spiritual posture that gets repeated again and again in different forms all the way through John's gospel.

"Come and see." In other words: this invitation calls us to stay close enough to notice and to come near enough to Jesus to be changed. You see, discipleship isn't primarily about information. It's about formation – about learning to see the world the way God sees it, and to be changed by it.

The question for us this morning is what does Jesus invite his disciples to come and see? What are we being invited to come and see?

The first "come and see" isn't flashy. It's not a miracle, or a sermon. It's just hospitality. Jesus says, essentially: Come and see where I live. Come and see where I stay. Jesus is not a God who drops in and vanishes. In the opening chapter of John's gospel, just before this encounter, we're told that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, that God literally "pitched a tent" among us and moved into the neighborhood. God stays with us. So discipleship begins with this invitation: Come and see that God is not far away. Come and see that God is not just in the "high and holy places," not only somewhere out there, only to be encountered in the afterlife, but here, with us, in real human life, with real human bodies and experiences. This matters because so much of what passes for religion these days tells us to look away from real life – to look for pie in the sky. But Jesus says, "No, come and see that I am close. I am here."

Then John takes us to a wedding at Cana - to a celebration, a family moment. And something goes wrong – they run out of wine! It's inconvenient, but it's also humiliating. It's the kind of thing that becomes an unwanted part of a family story – “Hey, remember when they ran out of wine at the wedding? What bad planners! So inhospitable, those folks!”

But Jesus turns water into wine. It's not just a cool party trick. It's not just a nifty miracle. Instead it's a sign – one that says, “In God's kingdom, shame and scarcity don't get the last word. The invitation is to come and see that God's reign looks like abundance, not humiliation. This miracle is not just about food and drink. It's about dignity. It's about the way Jesus consistently refuses to let people be reduced to their worst moment or their deepest need.

Then John leads us on to Samaria. Jesus “has to” pass through it. He sits at a well and speaks to a Samaritan woman, which breaks all kinds of social codes, ethnic barriers, religious taboos, and expectations around gender. He offers her living water. Then, her whole town comes out, meets Jesus, and says: we believe now not because of what you said, but because we have heard for ourselves. In other words: “We came and saw.”

Jesus invites a whole community to see that God's love is not tribal, just for the select few. God is not to be hoarded or kept in a box. God does not belong to the “right people.” The invitation is to come and see that God crosses boundaries and builds new kinship.

At the pool in John 5, there's a man who has been ill for 38 years. That's a long time. And no one has helped him. He is surrounded by people but still all alone. This is what the world does: it teaches us to walk past people who have been there “too long.” It trains us to see suffering as background noise where we don't even notice it anymore. But Jesus doesn't walk by. Jesus sees him. He does not treat him as a problem, or a teaching moment, or a cautionary tale of some sort. Jesus treats him as a person with dignity and offers him healing. The invitation is to come and see that in God's kingdom, the abandoned are noticed. As disciples of Jesus we are called to notice the people who have been made invisible.

In John 9, Jesus meets another overlooked man when he heals a man born blind, and what follows is not celebration but an interrogation. The religious leaders can't stand the disruption. The healed man becomes a threat to their way of understanding the world, so they start cross-examining him and trying to punish him. It's a disturbing moment in scripture that demonstrates what happens when religion stops being about love and becomes about control.

But Jesus comes back for that man, find him, and stands with him. The invitation is to come and see that Jesus not only heals, he also confronts whatever system tries to keep people marginalized.

In John 6, there's a crowd that's hungry with that comes a lot of anxiety. The disciples immediately do the math. Their calculations lead to what they perceive as an impossibility. The numbers simply don't add up. But Jesus takes what little there is, blesses it, breaks it, and shares it, until everybody eats. The invitation is to come and see that God's economy does not run on fear or anxiety. And if you've ever been a part of a feeding ministry here at St. Marks or somewhere else, you know that this story is not only about somehow miraculously having enough. It's about what happens when love refuses to let hunger become the norm. It's about a community learning to share and people learning to say, "There is enough when we stop believing the lie that is all belongs to us."

And then, we come to the story of Lazarus in John 11. It's a story of death, of grief, of a family that is beside itself with sadness, anger, and the desire to place blame. In this story, we get the shortest verse of the Bible, and also one of the most important: Jesus wept.

In John's Gospel, Jesus experiences the deep grief of human existence. Jesus weeps with Lazarus' family and friends. The glory is God in the flesh is standing at a graveside, weeping. The invitation is to come and see that God does not look away from grief or brush it under the rug. God comes near. And then while he is still weeping, Jesus calls Lazarus out of the tomb. This is what God's love looks like. It's not denial, it's not distance, it's presence and liberation.

As Jesus approaches his own death, in John 13, Jesus gets on his knees and washes feet. He washes the feet of his disciples, who are still looking for a king on a throne. He washes the feet of the ones who will betray and deny him. Jesus reveals himself as a forgiving king who bears the towel of a servant. The invitation is to come and see the radical upside-down nature of God's kingdom, where greatness is defined by service and love. Jesus invites us to see a different kind of kingdom. And if we don't come and see that, if we refuse to learn those kingdom ways, then we will keep building empires that look like domination while trying to ascribe to them holiness.

Then John takes us to the trial and the crucifixion. Pontius Pilate asks Jesus: "Are you a king?" And Jesus says, in words that all Christians should remember whenever the world tries to claim our allegiance: "My kingdom is not from this world." Christ's kingdom does not come through this world's logic, or violence, or scapegoating. The invitation is to come and see that the true king refuses to build his reign by harming the vulnerable, and instead builds it by standing with and among them, even unto death.

And finally. The resurrection. A garden. A woman weeping. And Jesus speaks her name. Mary Magdalene becomes the first witness, the first messenger: “I have seen the Lord,” she says. Here, “Come and see” becomes “Go and tell.”

This is the gospel invitation: Come and see the kingdom until you become the kind of person who can no longer unsee it. Come and see what Jesus is doing until all you want to do is join him in his work.

So here is a question for us, as a church, as disciples of Jesus: If John’s Gospel is a long unfolding of Jesus saying “come and see,” then what is Jesus calling us to come and see right now?

In recent months but especially this week, our local community has been shaken by ICE operations and raids, including Friday’s raid on Rio Grande in Nitro where ICE agents came in through the roof, trashed the owner’s house, and took 8 people, including a pregnant woman.

And right here, downtown, we still live among neighbors who sleep outside in winter, neighbors whose hunger and cold are treated like a nuisance rather than an urgent problem.

And the temptation, especially for respectable people, religious people, busy people, is to look away. To just keep things spiritual. To say: “Well, that’s awfully sad, that’s not my problem. That’s complicated, but it isn’t mine. That’s political, and I’m not going to get into that.” Martin Luther King, Jr. reminds us that “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere,” and “There comes a time when silence is betrayal.”

But the Gospel of John won’t let us do that, because Jesus keeps saying: “Come and see.” The specific invitation to us sitting here this morning might be, “Come and see the neighbor that fear wants you to forget. Come and see the human being that is being turned into a target so others can exercise their dominance. Come and see the person with nowhere to sleep and nowhere to go. Come and see, and then come close enough to Jesus to be changed.”

The moment we truly see Jesus, we start seeing what Jesus sees. And when we see what Jesus sees, we will find ourselves doing what Jesus does: feeding hungry people, refusing to let shame write the story, crossing boundaries, standing with the one being punished, telling the truth about systems that harm, practicing a different kind of citizenship. Again, MLK’s words echo for us today: “Life’s most persistent and urgent question is: what are you doing for others?”

We are invited to come and see the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And if Jesus takes away the sin of the world, then as disciples, we can't make peace with the world's cruelty and sin.

So let's let Jesus ask us the first question again: What are you looking for?

If you're looking for comfort without cost, then the Gospel of Jesus is not what you are looking for. But if you are looking for the living God, and for a kingdom that can't be bought, for a love that casts out all fear, and for a community that faithfully practices a different way of living, then you will hear the invitation again: "Come and see."

And then, having seen, may we become people who cannot look away and cannot stop living as citizens of the Kingdom of God. Amen.