

For the people of St. Philip's
John 1: 43-51
The Second Sunday after the Epiphany
January 18, 2009
Maria Hoecker, preacher.

The text from our Gospel reading is all about evangelism and mission. The dreaded "E" word distilled to its essence. First, Jesus said to Philip, "Follow me," and lo and behold, Philip followed!

It's amazing if you think about it. Jesus said, follow me, and here we sit, in St. Philip's Church, nearly 2000 years later. Follow me. That's backwards from the way we are inclined to gather people into the Christian faith these days, ever plotting and strategizing as to how we can attract folks to come and see. Do you know the song Day by Day? It's in the musical Godspell. It has the line, "To see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, Follow thee more nearly, Day by Day."

This is a wonderful description of a way to lead a Christian life. ...follow me. It describes a growth in understanding, a growth in love, and a growth in obedience. But it is NOT the way Jesus recruited his disciples. He did not say, "Here are some commentaries on scripture and some books of theology. I want you to study them and get to know me. Then when you know me, I want you to describe, if you love me, what your love for me is like. After that you can follow me." Thank goodness Jesus didn't ask Philip to first go to seminary before he followed him!!!! Seminary is famous for sucking the Spirit right out of you. What Jesus said to Philip was so much simpler and, in a way, much more difficult. He just said, "Follow me." If you have to think about it too much it just doesn't make any sense. That's the way it should be. Follow me. Trust in me. Love me, says Jesus.

The reason this story is so important is because it goes to what the heart of being a disciple of Jesus means. A disciple is not one who studies the teacher. A disciple is a person who actually walks with the teacher.

Jesus asks Philip to come and walk with him.

One of the consequences of walking along with Jesus was that Philip became convinced that Jesus was the one who is described by the language "him of whom Moses in the law and the prophets did write." And so Philip told Nathanael, based on that perception, "Come to Jesus and believe."

In a sermon, J. Hugh Magers writes that there are studies that show that most people come to church and into a claiming of Jesus as savior because someone invited them. Typically this is a family member or friend who beckons. It doesn't matter a whole lot what the motivation behind the invitation is. It can range from loving someone so much that you want to spend an eternity with them and know that a shared belief in Jesus is essential, to simply being kind enough to invite someone who doesn't have friends in hope that might be remedied by being part of a church congregation. Whatever brings a person in, the object of that is to spend time with the teacher and become a disciple.

I was invited into the Episcopal Church. My best friend, Katie, did the calling. I was a half-hearted Methodist at the time, this was nearly 15 years ago. First she invited me to her wedding to Dan. Trinity Episcopal Church, Atchison KS. I was so intrigued by the beautiful simplicity of that wedding, it was so sacred, the liturgy as profound as the love between Katie and Dan. About four years later I attended Dan's funeral. The profound became poignant. He was dead of cancer, Katie was left widowed with a very young son.

We buried Dan in Trinity's Memorial Garden on a hot day in July. The funeral was every bit as profoundly moving as their wedding had been, a sacred expression of their love in Christ, shared until in death, one of them parted.

Not long after that, Katie invited Rick and me to sing in Trinity's choir. "Come on along with me, sit with me, I'll show you what to do," is what she said. It was a bit intimidating, what with all the bowing and kneeling and book fumbling, but Katie showed me the way. We sang alto in the choir and she taught me merely by standing and kneeling and singing alongside me as we went along. We literally became neighbors, next door neighbors. She is Max's godmother. We were with Katie and her family just a few weeks ago, when we made our trek back to Kansas. Peter is a fine young man of 16 years. Katie is married to Reagan now. Katie and I talked long into the night of love and loss. We talked all the next day as though we had never parted, glad to be together again. She's been there for me, as I've been there for her. She came to Rick's death bed in Nashville. She came here to Brevard, for my ordination to the priesthood. It's been seven years since the Hoeckers left Third Street in Atchison to go to seminary,....seven years since Trinity parish sent us to seminary with love, prayers and pledges of money to help us answer the callings they saw in us...".Come follow me, Jesus said."

And now Rick's ashes are buried next to Dan's in that Memorial Garden. We buried him on a hot day in July. Katie and I are sisters in Christ, we have been all along, walking along....she out on the prairie and now I in the mountains, making our way as we continue to bid each other toward Jesus's call to "follow me." If one starts to falter, the other is there to encourage, day by day. That's what we do for each other. That's what friends do for each other. That's all any of us can do for each other.

Jesus ends the Gospel for this Sunday with this image, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

All Christians who are disciples, who spend time following Jesus, have stories to share of signs and wonders they have seen as heaven opens up and the angels of God ascend and descend upon the Son of Man.

There's a story about a group at the Episcopal Church Center in New York who meet regularly to read the Gospel and ask specific questions in a time of prayer. Three Native American clergy developed the process, called "Gospel Based Discipleship."

The time set aside for Gospel reflection and prayer has come to give shape to the ministries of the people who participate.

The reflection questions are quite simple: "What is Jesus (the Gospel) saying to me?" and "What am I going to do in response to Jesus (the Gospel)?" Each of these questions is preceded by a reading of the Gospel appointed for the day, and is followed by sharing of what those gathered hear Jesus saying. It's as simple as that, it's not about getting the "right" answers....it's all about asking the questions. It's about how we as disciples discern, asking the hard questions as to what God calls us to do in our ministries as baptized members of Christ's Body....as followers, not leaders.

Sometimes our response to a call is very powerful; more frequently it is quiet, or we receive the news with dismay. But in all cases, in this journey, we disciples, all of us, are invited, led, nudged, or sometimes dragged, kicking and screaming, into new levels of awareness, insight, mission, and ministry. I don't know about you, but since those quiet peaceful beginning days in the Trinity choir, I feel like I'm following Jesus kicking and screaming a good bit of the time....God laughs whenever I decide I now know where

Jesus is calling me to be.

One of the regular participants in the bible study described it this way. "We are called by Jesus to follow him and be with him. It doesn't mean that we know where we are going or what will happen. I was worried at one time about the effect my following Jesus would have on my family. Somehow, out of that day's Gospel, Jesus said to me, 'Do you suppose that I love your family?' I had to answer, 'Yes.' Then it came to me that as I follow Jesus, wherever that path leads, my family will be blessed. The anxiety went away. I realized that I could have spent months in counseling at no small expense, or just lived with the anxiety and been mildly crazy and somewhat ineffective, or I could spend time following the teacher. Following the teacher is the way to go." There is only one true teacher.

It's as simple as it can be. Follow Jesus. Jesus knows the Way.