

An Inviting Church
John 1: 35-51
Mayflower UCC, November 19, 2023
Consecration Sunday

Good morning. I'm glad to be here, preaching today on this Consecration Sunday. I'm Todd Lippert, one of the Community Ministers on staff. I'm a UCC minister. I've served a couple terms in the Minnesota House representing the Northfield area, and now I lead the Rural Organizing Project with ISAIAH MN. I do this justice work through ISAIAH connected to you and often with members of this church.

Consecration means "to make sacred." We make our gifts sacred today. We offer them to God. We ask God to bless them. We ask God to do the mysterious things God does with what we offer: amazing things, surprising things, hopeful things. We ask God to do mysterious, surprising, hopeful things in us: in our lives as we live in the midst of this community in need of grace and healing. We ask God to do mysterious, surprising, hopeful things through us: as we live as Christ's body for the world now in the midst of a city, a state, a nation, and a world that is desperate for grace and healing. We live as Christ's body in a world that, frankly, needs to be rescued. We ask God to breathe God's Spirit on our gifts so that they might do more transformation than we dare imagine.

Consecration Sunday is a day to wonder "what's next?" And, "what are we giving ourselves to, exactly?" God says, "Come and see. Take a look. Join me on this journey."

As I think about these questions, I am curious about an often overlooked activity embedded in our tradition, that everything else depends on - inviting. I think any rebirth of the church and its mission in this time depends on this essential Christian practice, this essential spiritual practice. The catchphrase of this passage setting up everything that is to come for the Gospel of John and for the church is an invitation - "come and see."

In our gospel story for today, the call of the disciples from John, both Jesus and the disciples are inviting others in. They are out talking with people. They are doing the work of building a movement. One person, one conversation at a time.

Disciple suggests a discipline - something you are serious about, religious about. Something you order everything else around. Could it be that inviting is what the story is telling us disciples should be disciplined about. Maybe inviting is the superpower of the disciple? Is it through our inviting that God does mysterious, surprising, and hopeful things?!

In the story, John the Baptist sends two anonymous disciples of his to Jesus. Jesus asks them what they are looking for, and they respond, "where are you staying, where are you going, what's going on?" Jesus replies, "come and see." It's an invitation to be on the journey too. No judgments, no qualifications needed, no insecurity about whether I'll be judged by this person because of what I'm inviting someone into. Jesus simply offers the invitation.

One of the two from John the Baptist is Andrew, the brother of Simon, and whatever Jesus has done and said behind the scenes in this story has inspired Andrew to go out and invite too. Andrew isn't going to just anyone. He has someone in mind, someone he knows. His brother.

I've always had the impression that the Simon of the gospels is an alpha. I imagine that Simon and Andrew's relationship as brothers may well be loving, but I'm guessing it is one where Simon is in charge and Andrew is not. Maybe Simon playfully, or not playfully, beats on him as older brothers do, puts him in headlocks, gives him nuggies. And Simon may be the most important person in Andrew's world. Andrew cares enough about this journey with Jesus that he says to himself, there's one person I need to go talk to, and he goes to Simon, and takes the risk of inviting Simon in.

Actually, we are just told he brings him to Jesus, which sounds more fun. Maybe Simon doesn't even want to go. Maybe Andrew is pushing, pulling, and dragging Simon to Jesus. Andrew could be doing what we do when we believe something matters so much that we are willing to bug, to bother, until someone relents to give it a try. Andrew tells Simon he has found the Messiah which means anointed one, a title reserved for Caesar. This pushing, pulling, and dragging is rebellious, it is dangerous, it is filled with risk.

Jesus is good at this. He knows how to handle people like Simon. He's got people skills. He gives Simon a nickname, to pull him in, "Simon, I need a name for you. I'm going to call you, Rock, I'm calling you Rock." Simon is now Peter which means Rock, and he's in.

Next we are told Jesus "finds" Phillip. He seeks him out specifically. There's intention. He finds him and simply says, "follow me." "Stand with us." Phillip, then, does the exact same. He goes to "find" Nathanael.

Nathaniel gives some resistance that makes this story real. "Where's this Jesus from?" "Nazareth." "Nazareth? "Can anything good come from Nazareth." Not unlike people today saying, "The Church? Can anything good come from the church?"

Philip doesn't push, pull, or drag. He let's Nathaniel make the decision and simply says, "come and see." Nathaniel does. Jesus works his magic and Nathaniel throws out more of those risky, rebellious titles reserved for Caesar, "you are the Son of God, the King."

Jesus closes with this mysterious promise of Nathaniel seeing heaven opened and angels ascending and descending on Jesus. This is very Gospel of John. In the theology of John, the incarnation of Jesus followed by his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension to heaven, literally pull, or stitch, God and the world back together. The story

closes with Jesus saying essentially, “the Love that sent me, the mission I’m on, is what heals heaven and earth. This is what heals it all.” There’s reason to invite people in.

In chapter 2, the disciples start to “see” particular things. They go the Wedding at Cana, the wedding banquet is a symbol of the restoration of ISRAEL, difficult to do unless Caesar is out. Next Jesus goes to the temple and throws out the money changers. Caesars face is literally on the money. Jews can’t use that idolatrous money at the temple, they have to change it out. Jesus symbolically clears all of the Caesars, the idolatry, and injustice connected to it out.

Come and see.

A movement is starting in this story that is about taking on the most powerful empire the world has ever known. The movement is starting to grow, people are being intentionally invited in, one conversation, one relationship at a time. Can love do anything about the injustice of Rome? Come and See. Can anything good come from Nazareth? Come and see Can love do anything with the injustice of this time? Can it do anything with racism, with transphobia, with the power of social media companies choosing profit over democracy, with the power of health care companies choosing profits over people, with the power of fossil fuel companies choosing profits over the future of human civilization? Come and See. Can anything good come from the church? Come and see.

One of my mentors, the Rev. Grant Stevenson, a Lutheran pastor turned faith based community organizer told me, “among all denominations, the United Church of Christ is the one that is clear that the gospel is about justice.” We are the denomination that is clear that the church, this movement, is about standing together against the powerful and their greed that is denying human dignity, stealing futures, causing suffering. We are the denomination that is clear that the good news is that the Love at the heart of the universe wants life to be fair.

I would add to this that in the Minnesota Conference of the United Church of Christ, this congregation is clearest that the Love that is at the heart of the universe doesn't just want life to be fair, but is enrolling us in the work of creating this world of justice. And the work we are being enrolled in is about more than charity, giving money. It is about more pastors preaching a good game about justice. It is about more than the Black Lives Matter sign in the yard, and getting in a good rant on social media. This congregation has been the most clear that doing justice is about organizing people.

This congregation is the one that invited me into the organizing journey I'm on now.

In the first churches I served, small churches in the heart of dairy county in Wisconsin, I felt like I could preach about justice, but I didn't feel like we were enrolling people in the work of building this world of justice. Our family moved to Northfield, and as I asked people about how built a movement for justice, people started saying to me, you need to talk to Sarah Campbell.

I did. And Sarah invited me. Sarah said, "you are talking about faith based community organizing. You need to get involved with ISAIAH MN." "What is that? I asked, "What will that do? I asked. "Come and see," she said to me. I did, and our United Church of Christ in Northfield did, and at every event we would see a big crew from this church, leading. Leading on health care reform, leading on climate justice, leading. You showed us the way. You showed me the way.

Now I organize full time with ISAIAH MN in rural communities. This is my call. This week I was talking with a pastor of a rural congregation in Minnesota. I asked her, "what do you want for your justice ministry for your congregation." She said, "I want it to be about more than charity. I know our people want change in our community, but we don't know how to build it." I said, "you are talking about faith based community organizing. You need to get involved with ISAIAH MN through the Rural Organizing Project." She said, "what is that? What will that do?" I said, "come and see."

As I worked on passing the MNCare Public Option last session, I worked with members of this church who tireless about inviting. Regularly taking the risk of inviting. We wouldn't have passed the bill without it. Minnesota now has the chance to put forward a truly one of a kind health care model that could show other states and our country how to create a people centered health care system, and it wouldn't have happened without inviting. Love did something mysterious, surprising, and hopeful through that inviting, and more surprises are in store.

When we think about what we are giving to today, the mission we own together, what's next, I think for this church it must be about justice, and about organizing, the enrolling needed to build a just world. It must be about this foundational discipline of inviting people in.

Who could you be seeking out like Andrew was seeking out Simon, like Jesus was seeking out Phillip, like Phillip was seeking out Nathaniel? Who needs change for their lives but feels powerless to change it. Who would experience something healing and life giving here, being a part of an enrolling community discovering how the love of God is doing mysterious, surprising, and hopeful things? The powerful legislative session we just had in this state wouldn't have happened without ISAIAH. Period. Full stop. ISAIAH isn't ISAIAH without this church. Period. Full stop.

What if what people said about this church was not just, "that church shows us how to do justice." But, "that church shows us how to organize. They are constantly inviting, seeking people out." What if people said, "They are relentless about inviting. I didn't think anything good could come from the church, but they are different. Come and see what they've done. See how they've changed Minneapolis. See how they have transformed health care. See how they are transforming us into a green, sustainable economy. See how many people they have invited in. They are so disciplined about it. I've never seen anything like it, and I can't imagine where we would be without them."

Will God do more than we can imagine with a discipline of inviting, of organizing?
Come and see.