



SAINT LUKE'S

“FRIENDSHIP WITH JESUS”
2ND SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

ISAIAH 49:1-7
PSALM 40
1 CORINTHIANS 1:1-9
JOHN 1:29-42

A SERMON BY THE REV. CAROLINE STACEY
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Today we hear about John the Baptist's unique relationship with Jesus. Layered onto that we enter into the beginning of the special relationships into which Jesus starts to call his disciples, one by one.

Today's gospel starts out with confusion. We hear the muddled testimony of John the Baptist: Twice he says: *I myself did not know him*. This is odd. According to Luke, John and Jesus are relatives, and both births are announced by angelic appearances to their parents.¹ John could mean: I knew Jesus, but I didn't realize who He was. God can be working under our noses in our lives through people we talk to, and we can be oblivious. Or, perhaps John and Jesus have such separate early lives that John literally didn't know Jesus at all. Either way, the first epiphany in today's gospel is John the Baptist's: *This is the Messiah*. John has been preparing the way for someone he didn't know or recognize until now.

As soon as John recognizes who Jesus is, there are consequences. Things change when we recognize Jesus for who he is. Immediately, John's disciples turn from following John and start to follow Jesus. One is Andrew and then his brother Simon Peter. John is losing two heavy-hitters from his team. A little later,

¹ Luke 1:11ff.; Luke 1:26ff

John the Baptist says: “he [Jesus] must increase and I must decrease”.² The baton is passing from John, but it was never his to hold on to. John realizes that this change is not something to fight but to embrace. John models for all future disciples that although God can work through us, it is not about us, but about God in Jesus.

Jesus today is at the very beginning of his public ministry. It takes Jesus 30 years to call his first co-workers. These people are the nucleus of Jesus’ alternative family, his family of choice. It is a critical part of his early ministry. It is not clear *why* Jesus chooses the people he does. How does he select them? To be honest, I think Jesus calls those who will come. Anyone! I think Jesus issued then and issues now a lot of invitations to people who don’t respond. We don’t hear too much about those. I have this image of Jesus walking along and stopping at every little fishing boat and pop-up stall on market day and asking: Will you join me? Until at last - a Yes. Apologies to anyone who thinks the disciples are a different species of human from us mere mortals. Discipleship is not comparative or about qualifications - that is the world’s way - it requires only willingness. Jesus’ invitation is to walk with him

² John 3:30

to discover what the fullness of humanity looks like as we watch and follow. Being human is an extraordinary state of being. Jesus calls every last ordinary/extraordinary one of us.

We use the word disciple. Really, the disciples are Jesus' friends. They travel, work and live together. When Jesus later in John's gospel says it directly, we know it is true. It has always been true: *I call you servants no longer because a servant does not know what his master is doing, but I have called you friends*, says Jesus.³ This is amazing. Friendship is a category of love in the ancient world. There are many words for love in Greek.⁴ *Storge* is what we usually mean in modern English when we say Friend. It is the affection we feel for those around us with whom we share common interests, at work or in hobbies or recreation. There's also romantic love (*eros*); and *agape* love (God's complete, self-giving love); and there is also *phileo*, brotherly, family love. Jesus uses *phileo* in talking about his friends. He is saying: *I have called you brothers, sisters*. When we understand "friends" to mean brothers and sisters of choice, that adds a new depth. Even in times of disagreement and estrangement, our siblings remain our siblings. Jesus offers his friends an unshakeable and permanent

³ John 15:15

⁴ Cf. C.S. Lewis: *The Four Loves*

love.

John's gospel offers a unique vision of discipleship that is friendship with God through Jesus. Friendship with Jesus is a more mature theology than a facile Jesus-is-my-buddy who has a personal plan for my life. John's distinctive understanding of Jesus' profound relationship to his disciples finds deeper and deeper fruition. At the Last Supper Jesus washes the feet of his friends. In his high priestly prayer for his friends and all will follow, Jesus includes his friends in his priesthood through the future church's life. Jesus prays to the Father: *Make these friends of mine one, as we are one*, so that their love for each other may be a sign to the world.⁵ Jesus' friendship manifests in the relationships of his friends to each other, and is itself part of the gospel. Our friendships in Jesus are a sign of the kingdom come near. A miracle of love pointing beyond itself to God.

In seminary we sometimes asked each other: what is your favorite gospel? Which speaks most powerfully to you and why? For me, it was always John. Friends of mine mostly preferred one of the other gospels and would issue volley of protests about the inferiority of John's gospel: "Oh, but John's Jesus is so remote he's

⁵ John 17

barely flesh and blood!...John's gospel was written down so late that it cannot be taken as seriously as Mark... In John, Jesus' divinity is so clear that his feet barely touch the ground like the rest of us... John's Jesus knows everything ahead of time; his real humanity gets lost". Yet in other ways, I find John's gospel is the most intimate of all. Because the Christology is so high, the humanity is all the more remarkable. The way to divinity is through humanity not around it, for Jesus and for us. *Come and See* is an invitation from one friend to another. As we accept Jesus' invitation, we are drawn into deeper friendship with him. Jesus becomes fully human and so do we. For me, John's Jesus has always sounded like a divine Mr. Rogers with a variant of his invitation: "Won't you be my neighbor?" *Won't you be my friend? I have called you friends.* Jesus desires our friendship. The disciples' journey into friendship with Jesus is the difference between knowing *about* Jesus and knowing Jesus. It's our journey too.

AMEN

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