

January 15, 2012  
Second Sunday after the Epiphany  
The Rev. Canon Robert D. Edmunds  
St. John's, Franklin/Trinity, Wrentham

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be ever acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

This morning we find Nathanael hanging out under a fig tree minding his own business, perhaps after a day of fishing on the Sea of Galilee. I can imagine him lounging there watching the birds fly overhead; the blue water of the big lake before him; the haze on the water over the distance as he looked east toward what we now call the Golan Heights on a lazy summer day when the temperature hovers around 100 degrees. Munching dates, drinking some wine, a little pita bread -- what's not to like? And then Phillip came by and told him about Jesus, the one about whom so much had been written; so much had been told; so much was being talked about. What is Nathanael's response?

The sarcasm is remarkable. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Nathanael expresses with his own lips the sarcasm and insult of the ethnic and racial slur. The problem with Nazareth, obviously, was that it was full of Nazarenes. Funny? Well, maybe not so much.

But there's more to the story. I believe Nathanael's response has another motive behind the insulting sarcasm, or at the very least, the wise-crack he offers. Is it possible that Nathanael is also expressing his own skepticism about Jesus? Is it possible he is checking to see if Phillip will accept Nathanael's cynical question? It might be a great way to start an argument; insult someone else . . . or test the waters.

Phillip's response is perfect. Phillip is neither threatened nor offended. Phillip does not get defensive. Phillip simply suggests that Nathanael "Come and see". The invitation is so simple. With this invitation the door is open for Nathanael to explore his faith on his own terms. Come and see. Come and see this Jesus and decide for yourself.

One of the hot topics whenever clergy are interviewed by churches is about growing the church. Everybody is all about enlarging the church membership, expanding the numbers of parishioners, filling the church to standing room only every Sunday. Search committees would not be doing their job if they did not bring this up. Clergy, of course, need to be prepared with an answer.

The key, it seems to me, is to be willing to make the invitation. Phillip provides us with such a good model. Come and see. You are the best advertising which Trinity has. In the same way that Phillip knew Nathaniel; his invitation is made with someone he knows, so also with all of us. An invitation to "come and see" is best done with people we already know. People with whom we already have a relationship. Maybe someone you know is searching for a church home and you don't even know it. People you know, know you and trust you. It is through such established relationships that we have the opportunity to invite people to try out Trinity as a safe place to explore their faith.

In such an easy-going conversation at the water cooler or in the Stop and Shop or Shaw's, none of us are going to arm twist a friend or co-worker to join the choir or get into the latest Bible Study – but it's easy to let people know what time our services are and we're easy to find on East Street on the Common in Wrentham. It is through such established relationships that we have the opportunity to invite people to try out Trinity as a safe place to explore their faith; with neither coercion nor manipulation. Just an invitation to come and see.

Perhaps the greatest hurdle in this is what do I say? This is not insurmountable. Extending an invitation to others to be part of our parish family can be as simple as, when someone asks you what you did this weekend . . . “Well, last night I went to our church pot-luck supper.” “Oh, what church do you go to?” “I go to Trinity” And here's the opportunity. A little bell goes off – do you grip their arm and ask with piercing eyes if they've been saved or do you say . . . “Do you have a church you belong to?” Further conversation may unfold from there, or perhaps the conversation comes to an end. But, in either case, the information about how important your church is to you is filed away for future reference. And who knows, the Holy Spirit may have found you some common ground with this person you never expected.

Some years ago I took a parish survey one evening about what kinds of things make you want to belong to a church. There were seventeen categories to choose from. Of the thirty surveys in our little non-scientific sample, 23 people checked off “a sense of community among the parishioners and/or a strong group life” were among the three most important factors in wanting to belong to a church. For the statistics hounds among us, that represents 76.6% of the respondents. Among the highest priorities for three out of four people on that Sunday evening was a sense of community in their church.

You know, something else interesting came out of this little survey. Denominational identity received five votes. Those who study church dynamics have been reporting this for years. “Brand loyalty” is less and less important, especially to younger people. The most important issue for belonging to a church is a sense of community across the board for all people of all ages. The most precious and beautiful buildings and liturgical expressions are virtually insignificant if a sense of belonging is not present first and foremost. Great preaching, outstanding music, a loving and caring Sunday School, a top-notch staff – all are for naught if a new person does not feel that they will be accepted into a community of people who might actually care about them.

If someone accepts your invitation to come and see for themselves how safe a place Trinity is to explore their faith and to ask the tough questions, they need a few things. They need our warm welcome; they need decent coffee at coffee hour; clean bathrooms; walkways cleared of snow and the building well lit and warm on a winter Sunday morning. All of this and more are true. They also need to know they are accepted with all of their questions. They need to feel welcome to bring all their skepticism and their cynicism as well as their hopes and their need for healing and wholeness here.

We are not a church which advertises that we have all the answers. The fundamentalists have a corner on that market. I don't know about you, but people in general, and clergy in particular, who have all the answers scare me to death. While we may not have all the answers, we have a few answers that shape our lives in the most profound way. We have a few answers that are subject to change. We have some other answers that elude us and may take a life-time to figure out.

We are a church in which questions are welcome. We are a church in which the skeptic and the cynic are welcome to join the faithful. God-willing, Nathanael would feel at home here. God-willing, so will the friends and neighbors you continue to invite to “Come and see” for themselves.

In the Name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.