

Feast of St. John the Evangelist – 22 January 2012

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

Yesterday, I participated in a training workshop at Grace Christian Fellowship to learn more about sound systems. While I was there I noticed a poster placed prominently and extensively throughout the building. It was titled: "*I am a disciple.*" There were four points:

1. *I have made Jesus Christ Lord of my life.* (To me, this means, I have made Jesus Lord – not my wants, not my desires, not my fears, not my judgments.)
2. *I have entered into a process of relational discipleship with other maturing Christians.* (To me, this means that I cannot live my life as a Christian by myself. We need community – to support us, to challenge us, to enable us to grow, to teach us forgiveness and love. That is why both Cursillo, the Anglican Fellowship of Prayer, and Alpha all introduce participants to small Reunion Groups, which are models for Christian accountability.)
3. *I am becoming more Christ-like.* (It is easy to think this means being “good” or “pious” or especially “holy”. But Jesus himself said, “No one is good, except God.” Being \Christ-like means living like Christ lived. Jesus said, “Go and do as I have done – heal the sick, care for the poor, visit those in prison, break bread with others who are not like ourselves, give sacrificially, pick up your cross and follow me, and love one another as I have loved you.”)
4. *I am committed to the mission of Christ, which is to go into the world and make disciples.* (This doesn’t mean scalp hunting for Jesus. What this does mean is to live a life of such integrity, such sacrifice and such witness, that others are drawn to what we have and to what we do, and then to point to the Lord of life, to Jesus, who enables us to live our lives in such love and mercy.)

This Sunday is the Third Sunday after the Epiphany, and traditionally the lectionary readings are about the calling of the disciples. If we had heard the customary readings from Mark today, then we would have heard about Jesus’ call to Peter and Andrew, James and John.

Here at St. John’s, even though we are celebrating the Parish Feast of St. John the Evangelist, nonetheless, the Gospel is also about Jesus’ call to discipleship – both to Peter on the beach, after the Resurrection when he said, “Follow me,” and to John, when Jesus said, “if it is my will that he remain until I come, what is it to you?”

In other places in the Gospel story we learn the names of all twelve disciples. We also are told the names of a number of faithful women, who followed Jesus and who ministered to him in various ways. Every single one of these followers of Jesus was at one time or other called by name. Jesus reached out, either directly, or through another person, and invited each one of these early disciples to follow him. What is significant is that Jesus didn’t call an anonymous group of followers. Rather Jesus called individual people who could be identified by name and who have continued to be named for two thousand years. John the Evangelist is named in the name of our Church – St. John’s.

This shouldn’t be surprising. In the tenth chapter of the Gospel of John we hear Jesus describe the relationship he has with his disciples in terms of a shepherd and his sheep.

In Palestine the shepherds actually knew each and every one of their sheep, and called them individually when it came time to leave the sheepfold and go out to pasture or to return to the fold at night.

Referring to his disciples and to himself, Jesus states that "the sheep hear [the shepherd's] voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice." To be a disciple of Jesus is to be known by name, and to be called to follow him wherever he might lead.

This was true in New Testament times, and has continued to be true throughout the course of Christian history. The history of the church is the history of persons called by Jesus to follow him in every day and age. These are the "saints", known and unknown, who make up the great body of the faithful, those who have known the love of Jesus, and have shared that love with others. Jesus called each and every one of them at a particular time. At a particular moment in time, each and every one of them was baptized.

Today, the church continues to be made up of individual persons, called by Jesus to follow him.

Each one of us, gathered here this morning, is called by Jesus to be a disciple. That call was made explicit at our baptism. As you know, whenever a person is baptized, that person is presented by name. When the actual baptism with water occurs, the person is baptized by name. All of which is to say that the Church of Jesus Christ recognizes the unique humanity of each and every individual, the God-given uniqueness of each and every one of us.

We are not just a small chunk of faceless humanity. We are not just numbers stored in some sort of cosmic data base. Each and every one of us, who together make up St. John's Episcopal Church, is a unique and valued Christian person, created in the image of God, and saved by God's son, Jesus, and called to be his witnesses. That is true whether you think you are a particularly "good" Christian or not. It is true even if you consider yourself to be a rather "bad" person some of the time.

This is gospel. This is good news. And it is especially good news in a society where we seem to become more and more nameless, more and more faceless, all the time. Here at St. John's you are not nameless. You are a disciple, called by God to follow the Son.

So what does it mean to be a disciple? Like the poster at Grace Church said: Yes, it does mean to make Jesus Christ the Lord of our life. Yes, it does mean to live in community with other followers of Jesus, seeking to grow in relationship and love. Yes, it does mean to strive for greater holiness, modeling our lives after our Lord. Yes, it does mean to invite others in to this journey.

But it also means to live a prophetic life – showing the love and forgiveness we profess, and striving for justice in our society. It means faithfulness, not just for pious living, but also for living our lives in ways that participate in the kingdom of God, as it is coming on this earth – a kingdom of joy and thanksgiving, love and mercy, hope and resurrection.

Like the first disciples, we are not just called once, but we continue to be called to ever greater faithfulness. As they journeyed with the Lord, they sometimes understood and they sometimes didn't have a clue. Sometimes they lived out what Jesus was teaching them, but often they did not. They had to renew their sense of call, just as we do, sometimes on a daily basis. The life of discipleship is an ongoing journey, and the goal is progress, not perfection.

This is the Sunday of the Annual Parish Meeting, when we gather as a Christian Community to attend to the order of the Church – electing new members for the Vestry, approving a working budget, and reflecting on and celebrating our life together in Christ. The Annual Meeting can also be an opportunity to renew our sense of call as a community of faith, by invoking the blessings of our Patron Saint John on the work that this Church is doing – with each other and with the needy in this community.

We are God's heart and hands in this time and place. We are God's love with feet on. So my prayer today is that the beloved disciple, John – who points us to the love of God, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God who calls us each by name – may John, our patron saint and fellow disciple, intercede for us and bless us in our work together, today and in God's coming kingdom and God's kingdom come.

May it be so. Amen.

The Reverend Canon Meredith Hunt, Rector

With special thanks to my husband, the Reverend David Lillvis, for some of the ideas and words of this sermon.