

*Epiphany 2, Year A*

*January 19, 2014*

Jesus said, "What are you looking for?"

In today's Gospel, we hear John's version of how Jesus met his first disciples. Apparently they were already disciples of John the Baptist, already seekers. John points out Jesus to them and they begin to follow him. Then Jesus turns and asks them a question, "What are you looking for?" They don't answer directly. Instead they ask where he is staying and Jesus responds, "Come and see." Basically the first two disciples just wanted to be with him.

This morning, if Jesus were to ask you, "What are you looking for?" what would you say? Depending on the circumstances of our lives, we might respond in different ways—health, peace, protection and guidance for our children, and so forth. But I think there is one thing we are all looking for no matter the circumstance of our lives; and even if we might not consciously know it. We are looking to be with Jesus—we are looking for God's love.

That is why we come to church. There might be a mixture of other reasons, too; but really we come here because we have heard the Good News that Jesus taught and embodied, that God loves us. We experience that love in our worship and in the words we hear and in Holy Communion. And we experience that love in one another, in our fellow followers of Jesus who gather looking for God's love.

In God's plan for salvation, that experiencing of God's love in our relationships with one another is critical. If God's love spreads to us but not through us, then we are frustrating God's plan for us, the plan set in motion through Jesus. Because just as one of Jesus' first words to us according to John's Gospel is, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son..."; so one of his last words to us is, "Love one another just as I have loved you." The church is God's place for us to remember God's love for us; and also to practice our love for each other. Some of you have heard me call church, "the laboratory of love," the place to experiment and learn how to love so that when we leave here, we can love people out there.

The church serves as a laboratory of love because of the different types of folks that gather here. Now at times, a church like ours can look pretty similar and there are other churches where it seems even more that way. People dress alike, look alike, talk alike, and so forth. And when we are so similar, there is sometimes less opportunity to learn how to love.

But sometimes in church—including this church—we are different. Very different. I remember one of the sweetest stories about our son and one of his church friends visiting my parents several years ago. My son Will and his friend Shalin were very different. Shalin colored his hair different colors depending on his mood—green, purple, blue. Will did not. Will dressed pretty much like me. Shalin did not. They were different.

Now my mom was a very traditional Southern lady, very clear and strong in her views. Mom would not be in favor of young men coloring their hair blue. But in this stage of Mom's life when Will and Shalin visited her, Mom had developed health issues that affected her short term memory. This is where Shalin got to practice the lessons on love he had learned in church.

So when Will and Shalin sat down to visit with Mom and Dad, one of Mom's first remarks was, "What is wrong with your hair?" (I think Mom would have said that in her prime, too). We all laughed and Shalin graciously said, "I have silly hair." Mom nodded and the conversation continued. But because of Mom's short term memory loss, a few minutes later she repeated, "What is wrong with your hair?" And Shalin repeated his answer, "I have silly hair." That loop in the conversation continued throughout their visit and Shalin patiently continued his kind response and stayed engaged in the other parts of the conversation. I was so impressed with him that day. He was so much more than a teenager with blue hair.

That is a dramatic example of how we can be different—age, health, appearance. And in that case, our laboratory of love brought forth a healthy example of how we can love one another as Jesus loved. In our parish, we have opportunities like that, too. We are different based on age, appearance, interests, preferences, and on and on. When we meet someone here who is different from us, let's view it for what it is—a chance to learn to love someone instead of placing them in a category and dismissing them. And as we learn to do that here, in the relative safety of church, we are more likely to learn to love people outside the walls of this place, too.

Sometimes our differences are harder to deal with. It is more than being put off by blue hair or bad health. Sometimes our differences boil over into disagreements and sometimes those disagreements become very contentious. This is evident in our political life today. Politicians and talking heads on TV seem to be unable to stop themselves from stoking the fires and our common life suffers. Some of us get riled up, too. As long as our anger is contained to the den of our homes as we yell at our TV's, that's not too bad. But often it boils over into the other areas of our lives and we have a hard time even having a relationship with people we disagree with.

When that happens, this is another chance for the church to be a laboratory of love. We can offer what we learn here to the world around us. Let me tell a story from my own

experience. Many of you know that Gray Temple has been my pastor, mentor, and friend for over thirty years. When I first met Gray, I was twenty-three with very different life experiences, political beliefs, and so forth. But we didn't focus there (that's probably for the best or we wouldn't have had much of a relationship). We focused on our common faith in Jesus and our common experience of the Spirit. That beginning bonded us and gave us a chance to learn to love one another.

Now over these thirty-plus years, Gray and I have had disagreements, sometimes openly, sometimes that we repressed. Some were on political issues, some on church debates. But through it all, we have stayed faithful in loving each other. When I was in the hospital the first time, I called Gray and he and his wife Jean were there within minutes to anoint and pray for me and to comfort Lynn and me. We have learned what love is. That does not mean our disagreements aren't real. It doesn't mean we ignore them. I know I have learned and changed in many ways over the years through our conversations and debates. But our disagreements do not define us or limit our ability to love each other.

There are other ways we can learn to love here. There are people who come to church discouraged or disaffected, seeking Jesus and the Good News of God's love. We offer worship and words and Communion to help them find Jesus, to find God's love. And part of what we offer here is—us; we offer our lives, our kindness, our ability to accept people who are different, our ability to disagree without being contentious. We will not always be perfect—and that is when the Good News offers forgiveness to us and the ability to begin again.

And the work of this church, this laboratory of love, is not limited to just this space. We are called to take what we learn here and live it in the world out there. The grace to love as Jesus loved is not to be limited to members of this church (though we definitely need to learn and practice it here!). It is to be taken to the world around us so that they too will know that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son for them. Amen.