

Last Tuesday night at our "Open Doors" spiritual discussion group, about 12 or 15 of our participants were from St. Joe's addiction recovery center here in town. The topic that evening was hope and how we experience hope in our lives, and one of the men from St. Joe's mentioned how important prayer has been in his experience of hope. Several of the other men mentioned the same thing, and through the course of the conversation I found out that there is a prayer group at St. Joe's that meets every evening. Interestingly enough, the prayer group is not led by a staff member. Rather, a couple of months ago two or three of the men gathered to pray together, and then over the course of the following weeks one by one they began to invite others to join them. Right now, the prayer group, entirely initiated and led by the patients, consists of about 25 or 30 people. They recognize that through prayer they can seek and find God and receive God's transformative power to heal them and make them whole.

As I listened to these men, I was struck by several things. First, that they were seeking God. Second, that through prayer they experienced God, and once they experienced God they continued to follow God. And third, that they shared that experience with others and invited them to participate in it, too.

That's very similar to what we see in today's reading from the Gospel of John. John the Baptist and his disciples have been seeking God. John has just baptized Jesus, and the very next day he sees Jesus walking by and points him out to his own disciples as the Lamb of God--God's own Son who comes from God and who will bring reconciliation between humanity and God. John had experienced the presence and power of God in the baptism of Jesus, but he doesn't keep that experience to himself. Rather, he testifies to others what he has seen and what he knows. And not once, but twice. The second time, he is with two of his disciples, Andrew and one other. And this time, when he points out to them the truth about Jesus, they leave John and follow Jesus. Later after having spent time with Jesus, Andrew goes to his brother, Peter, and invites him to come and experience Jesus, too.

None of this would have taken place, though, if the disciples hadn't found what they were seeking--the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One of God. Jesus asks Andrew and the other disciple, "What are you looking for?" "What are you seeking?" And when they respond, "Where are you staying?" "Where do you abide?" he responds, "Come and see."

"What are you looking for?" "Come and see."

What are *you* looking for? When you come to church, what do you seek? When you decide to follow Jesus, whom are you following? When God invites you to "come and see", what will you find?

Some people come to church because they are looking for community. The church is certainly a community, but there are lots of other places besides church where you can find community. And the church, like any community, has its flaws because it's made up of flawed human beings. If the church is distinguished from other communities, it is because the church has at its heart, Jesus Christ.

Some people come to church because they are looking for justice and peace. Hmmm. In its 2,000 year history, the church has failed plenty of times, often tragically, to foster justice and oppose systemic evil. And we all know that the church is no stranger to conflict. Yet, as one preacher has said, "You can't follow Jesus for ten steps without bumping into questions of justice, but you can chase justice for 1,000 miles and still not find Jesus."ⁱ Justice and peace in the church can be found, but only when the focus is on Jesus Christ.

Some people come to church because they are looking for life purpose and fulfillment, for self-actualization and to be "fed." Well, the church can provide all that, but it won't be what you expect. Your life purpose will come only through following Christ to the cross; your fulfillment will come only when you lay down your life for others, as he did; your self-actualization will come only when you deny your self, as he did; your being fed will come only when you feed others, as he did.

If you seek God when you come to church, the church at its best, at its most authentic, at its most Christ-centered will offer this: death and resurrection. In baptism, we die to the old life of sin and death and are reborn by the Holy Spirit to a new life of grace. In the Eucharist, when we partake of the bread and wine we are united with Christ in his self-offering, celebrate our redemption, and receive a foretaste of the heavenly banquet which

is eternal life. In listening to the scriptures, both the Old and the New Testaments, we consistently hear about God's transformative power to bring life out of death: rescuing people from flood waters and bringing them to dry land, liberating people from bondage, converting persecutors into preachers, making sinners into saints. In acts of outreach, we live out Jesus' call to feed the hungry, give a drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, take care of the sick, and visit the imprisoned, because when we do these things for others we are doing them for Christ. What God invites us to "come and see" is the way God brings life out of the places of death in our world.

The thing is, if you do accept God's invitation to "come and see," get ready to be changed. Because that's what encountering God will do to you. That's what following Christ will do to you. Remember, when Andrew brought his brother Simon to Jesus, Jesus took one look at Simon and changed his name to Peter, which means "rock."

I keep going back in my mind to our friends at St. Joe's. They accepted God's invitation to "come and see." When they began to pray together, they were seeking God. They found God. They found God's healing power that can take your breath away. They found new life. And when they found God, they shared God with others.

In John's Gospel, Jesus' first words appear in the form of a question, an ordinary question with extraordinary significance: "What are you looking for?" or "What are you seeking?" What motivates you? What is that you really need, not just on the surface, but deep down into the core of your being? What are you looking for?

If you're looking for the Word made flesh, God Incarnate, come and see Jesus. If you want to know what love is like, come and see Jesus. If you want to experience God's glory, to be filled with bread that never perishes, to quench your thirst with living water, to be born anew, to abide in love, to behold the light of the world, to experience the way, the truth, and the life, to enter into life everlasting, come and see Jesus.

If you want to know God, come and see Jesus.

ⁱ Wayne Miller (ELCA); quoted by Robert Saler in *The Christian Century* (December 21, 2016), 21.