

Epiphany 2, Year A

January 20, 2008

RCL

Isaiah 49:1-7

Psalm 40:1-12

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

John 1:29-42

The Rev. Susan Hayden
Russell

OK, I admit it. I like to watch a soap. Just one. I've been watching it for years, since my kids were little. It's the one called *The Young and the Hopeless*, at least that's my name for it. I tape it since I can't usually be at home when it airs. It's relaxing to watch something so far from reality –

I guess it's the opposite of reality TV – but occasionally it gives me an example to use when speaking about the scripture on a Sunday morning. A sermon illustration. Like yesterday.

Recently Victor – how shall I describe Victor to those of you who are not also addicted to this program? – Victor is the original male chauvinist, who has money and power running out of his ears. Everything he does is to secure more money and power but lately he has gone to such extremes that he has alienated what's left of his family, to the point where his son Nicholas was moved to present him with a quotation from Franklin Delano Roosevelt, printed and framed, which had at one time held meaning for him.

The quote was this: "It's a terrible thing to look over your shoulder when you're trying to lead and find no one there." Nick was saying that his dad has driven all his friends and loved ones away and there's no one left to pay any attention to him.

Well, it's true. Leaders do need people to lead. Preachers need listeners to preach to, teachers need students. In fact, the worth of a leader is often determined by who and how many are listening.

If you don't believe me take a look at how much rides on the result of each of the presidential primaries. How many people are listening? How did they vote? How many followers will it take for a candidate to win the party's nomination?

In fact, we base a great deal on who follows a leader. And today, as so often happens in Holy Scripture, we have just read of a leader who upsets the world's expectations by giving away that which we think he should want to keep at all costs.

John the Baptist, in today's reading from the gospel of John, directs his own disciples to turn and follow Jesus instead of him. And they do. "Look," he says, "here is the Lamb of God." And he tells of how he witnessed Jesus' baptism and saw the Spirit descend on him from heaven and heard God telling him – John - that this is the One who is coming. This One is the Son of God.

We humans do have the capability of driving other people away from us, even those we love, by being too greedy or too vain or too self-absorbed, like my vicious friend Victor, but John gives up his followers intentionally and freely because it is God's will that they follow Jesus.

John will look over his shoulder and see no one following and realize, not that it is a terrible thing, but that he has fulfilled his calling, finished his vital work on earth, accomplished his mission. He gives up his authority, his influence over these he has taught and baptized, and does it willingly as a part of God's plan.

What we have in this gospel passage, beyond seeing John demonstrate his understanding that he must glorify God and not himself, what we also have here is a short dialogue between those disciples, who are shifting to a new teacher, and Jesus, who turns and sees them there. And in that 3-sentence dialogue we have volumes about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

He turns and says to them, "What are you looking for?" They answer with another question, "Where are you staying?" and he responds, "Come and see. "Simple? Not at all. A little disjointed? Yes, as conversations go, but it does contain so much for us.

Two things are important to know about this gospel. First, this dialogue with Jesus is meant to include us. The reader is a character in the story, drawn in among the disciples as we all respond to Jesus. Secondly, the Greek verbs chosen by this writer often have more than one meaning. We can read different levels of meaning into what is said.

The text says, for example, that these disciples of John's followed Jesus. We can picture that literally, them walking behind him, but the deeper meaning is that they became his disciples, that they made a major change in their beliefs and in their lives and gave their loyalty to Jesus.

He asks them, "What are you looking for?" and it's not a simple question at all. It asks them to look deep within and examine what they are searching for in their lives. It asks them what they believe, and what they are looking for through the eyes of faith.

How do they respond? They call him Rabbi. Another indication that they now consider him their teacher. And then, "Where are you staying?" They don't mean "are you bunking at the Holiday Inn or staying with a friend?" The Greek word "meno" for "stay" also has a deeper meaning here. It's about permanence. Are you staying? Will you be sticking around? Can we count on you? And deeper yet, where does this permanent presence of yours take us in our understanding of God?

Where are you staying? How do we find you? That might be more than the disciples were able to articulate at the time, but the Spirit was working in them, telling them this man would change all of life and make it worth living. They were compelled to find out more about him and to let him shape their lives.

And what is his answer to "where are you staying?" He doesn't tell them. He says, "come and see."

Because to be his disciple will not mean following directions but following him. Come and see. Follow him, watch him, hear him, learn what he does, learn who he is, trust him, believe in his goodness, know God through him. Come and see.

The grace to see and hear and follow was given by God to these first disciples so that they could see him through the eyes of faith. They followed. And they also brought others to him. Andrew brought his brother, Simon, who became one of the most significant of Jesus' disciples, Peter, the rock on whom our Lord said he would build the Church.

So what do we take from this gospel story for our own lives? What does it mean for us in our time to follow him and be his disciples?

We see that to be a disciple is to be actively engaged in following Jesus. There are so many active verbs here. "Look, see, turn, come, stay."

Also, to be a disciple is to work at learning what it is we are looking for, to bring our deepest longings and desires for life before God in prayer and then to search for the place where he satisfies our longing. Where are you staying?

That means pray. Or, as young Daniel Catalano said in the Youth Group's Monthly Breakfast presentation of the MDGs, explaining what we all can do to help meet the needs of people around the world, Daniel listed some things that can be done and then said "and, the ever-popular, PRAY." Prayer is indeed how we learn of God's desire for us. And for a disciple it is ever-popular.

Then we "come and see." The practice of following, making the choices Jesus would have us make in our lives, learning all we can about him from scripture, bringing others to him, giving up the desire for personal glory to shed the light on Christ instead.

There are people like Victor, the soap character, in this world. It is possible, through God's gift of free will, to become someone like him. But we seek instead to be Jesus' disciples. There are many who have lived their lives as disciples. Some even in our time.

We celebrate one of them this weekend, The Rev Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Brother Martin dedicated his life to preaching nonviolence and to teaching all of us, white and black alike, that all of God's children deserve equal opportunities. He had a dream – that all God's children would someday be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

He was eloquent. We remember many of his words. Martin had a sense of what he was looking for as he followed Jesus as a disciple. He knew something about where Jesus was staying as he focused on the moral issue of equal rights for all God's creatures. And he followed, actively, teaching all of us. Martin was a believer and a follower of Jesus, who brought many other people to him.

Today our Prayers of the People will be in his honor and in celebration of his life and witness to our society and the world. We celebrate, too, that it is within all of us to follow Christ as his disciples. Thanks be to God.

Soli Deo Gloria