

EPIPHANY II

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" John 1:43-46

My mother, of blessed memory, was once told by someone with authority that in Hebrew Scripture people never do what God says without questioning and arguing with God, while in the New Testament the disciples always do what Jesus says without hesitating or asking why.

And, as with so much of what people think about scripture, this is just plain wrong. Think of Abraham, who's prepared to sacrifice his son on God's say-so without a qualm. Then think of Nathanael, *Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*, (a question which sounds more like something one of the legion of contenders for the Republican nomination might ask about another one. *Can anything good come out of Bain Capital? Out of Texas?*)

I suspect that my Mum, a self-doubting Christian and a very devout Episcopalian, was snagged by that inaccurate description of the disciples' attitude and behavior because she yearned for what she imagined to be a simple faith. She told me when I was a teenager that she envied me my faith, and I've always thought that was misguided, because my adolescent faith was unformed and erratic. But in that sense it was simple, and maybe that was what she envied. (Or maybe I'm a self-doubting Christian too, or was then, and my faith was more firm and founded than I remember)

In any event, for most of us here this morning, I suspect, faith is not

simple. Like Nathanael, like all the disciples, really, for most of us faith includes doubts, complexities, uncertainties, and skepticism. We may sometimes think that it would be easier to live in Jesus' time and to know him, because then we would believe without reservation.

And that's what Jesus, at least John's Jesus, demands. The theme of accepting or rejecting Jesus is a constant in John's Gospel, where the people he meets are provoked to make a judgment about him, must decide for or against him. John has little tolerance when people hesitate or refuse to make a decision. There's no room for middle ground.

However, the middle ground is where the disciples find themselves most of the time in the other gospels. They are always questioning, balking, wondering why. They keep disappointing and betraying Jesus until the very end, and they don't really *get it, get Jesus*, until after he dies. Theirs is definitely a fake-it-till-you-make-it story.

I think that's what Mum thought she did, *fake it till she made it*, and she was a woman of great faith. She gave and gave and gave, in the name of Christ. And the more she gave, the more she got in return.

In some senses we probably all think we are faking it till we make it, with Jesus. And you know what, that's okay. What's not okay, I think, is to wait until we think we've *made it*, faith-wise, before we start giving.

The disciples may be querulous, obtuse, and fearful. But they do follow Jesus, they keep working for him, and they give up their livelihoods and their lives in his service. Questions and all, they keep at it.

Now comes my pitch. This is what we call a *Come to Jesus* moment. We need all of you here today to start giving, and giving more, to St. John's. Our parish is struggling right now.

At our discernment day back in November, you made a long list of things you loved and cherished about the parish. The spiritual life here, you said, including the emphasis on Jesus and the promise of salvation, the accepting nature of the community, the (small) size and neighborhood location, the freedom of theology, the diversity and commitment to social justice, the sermons, music, sacramental focus and liturgical variety, the children, food, and (thankfully) the rector.

You also listed what you hoped for: more justice work , more outreach, and more fun and fellowship were at the top of the list. Close behind were increased membership, a youth program, more bible study and a prayer retreat, and then a number of other items ranging from property improvement to sing-able hymns.

But how are we going to keep what we love and grow what we hope to grow? We have too few people doing far too much work. We have people who are on the vestry, the altar guild, and altar ministry, and teach church school (yes, the same people doing all those jobs at once.)They all have day jobs, too. And I'm worried about them. They rarely complain, but they need help and relief.

We have no one to head our buildings and grounds committee, our hospitality committee, or our outreach committee. As I write, our pledge total for 2012 is *half* of what it was for 2011. We are hurting, people. Seriously.

A parishioner wrote to me the other day, *Anne, I love the version of the Prayers of the People that includes making a commitment to participating more fully in our community of faith. I really wonder what people think that means. My life is so much richer from the investment I make in my attempt to discern what I really believe, my*

intentional focus on God in my life and the nurturing I get from our community of faith. I get so much from participating fully in the life of St. John's, I don't know how I can ever give back enough.

I know the truth of these sentiments, which entirely reflect my own experience of growth in faith. The more you give, the more you get. People who give and give, in the name of Christ, get more and more in return. That was my mother's experience, that's mine, and I know that the other folks who give devotedly and generously to St. John's agree with what my correspondent said so eloquently.

As I hope I made clear in the preceding paragraphs, we need more people giving more. This means you, all of you. If you haven't pledged yet for 2012, we need you to do that now, so we can make a budget for this year. If you've been asked to serve on vestry or a committee and said *no, not now*, please reconsider. If you haven't been asked, please say *yes* when someone comes to you. If no one asks, please volunteer. Talk to me or another parish leader.

Please take my words and ponder them in your hearts. Please hear in your hearts what we pray when we say: *We give thanks for the many blessings we enjoy in our lives, especially for this community, and pledge ourselves to join more fully in our communal life of faith.*

Please remember those blessings, all those we listed at our discernment day. And please, please, make a new and deeper commitment to our community. The rewards *are* great. As Jesus tells Nathanael, *Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." Alleluia, alleluia! Amen*