



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Will You Come and Follow Me?

By The Rev Sharon Gracen

January 15th, 2012

*Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown? Will you let my name be known,
will you let my life be grown in you and you in me?**

In the Jewish tradition, it is said that when the student is ready, the teacher appears. Mind you, the student is expected to do some of the work, to actually looking for the teacher. In the Gospel of John, the first ones to follow Jesus were doing just that, they were seeking a teacher of the truth. Andrew was already a follower of John the Baptist, but he was looking for something more, and when he found Jesus, he ran and told his brother, Simon Peter, that he had found the one they were awaiting. Then we come to the twist of the story. Jesus begins to summon those who were not looking. It says, he went to Galilee and he found Philip. The power of being summoned by one such as Jesus was so overwhelming that Philip had to bring some others along, so he found Nathaniel. From this story, we hear that those who seek the Christ will find him and even those that do not will be invited to follow. However it comes, the experience of Jesus is love like nothing ever experienced—love that must be shared.

*Will you leave yourself behind if I but call your name?
Will you care for cruel and kind and never be the same?
Will you risk the hostile stare should your life attract or scare?
Will you let me answer prayer in you and you in me?*

We have no idea what Philip and Nathaniel left behind – home, job, family. There is the story of James and John abandoning their father in the fishing boat, leaving him to mend the nets and carry on without them. Most likely, none of them had any idea what it would mean to give themselves to following this man, this living word of God. They probably thought it would be an adventure, a great new swashbuckling chapter in the history of Israel, just like in the days of David – all those glorious battles. And yet, their names were called, as is yours, to a journey that begins with leaving the self behind.



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It's so obscure, it hard to describe. Leaving yourself behind isn't like forgetting your lunchbox or dropping an old nickname. It is the willingness to think of yourself differently, no longer separate, but intertwined in the lives of your companions, and in the larger human family. It means that you do nothing with only yourself in mind. The joys and sorrows of others are yours, just as yours affect them. It matters not whether you have previously known someone as a friend or an enemy. Once drawn into the Christ journey those distinctions are meaningless. This is the hard one for me. I do so enjoy my righteous indignation but lately when I have tried to exercise it, it hasn't seemed like as much fun as usual. When it first happened, I assumed that I was coming down with something and that soon I'd be back to my usual quick witted, fault finding self, and then one day it occurred to me – I'm not supposed to be gleeful when I hear of my enemy's distress, I am supposed to love them and to know that their pain is also mine. The fact that my response to this awareness was "rats!" means I have in no way succeeded in leaving all of myself behind but it is getting harder to keep dragging the old worn out pieces with me.

Will you love the "you" you hide if I but call your name?

Will you quell the fear inside and never be the same?

*Will you use the faith you've found to reshape the world around,
through my sight and touch and sound in you and you in me?*

There is such risk and vulnerability in following Jesus and in this dying to self. Do you dare believe in the promise? After all if you don't look out for #1 who's going to? Seriously though, if you spend your time doing for others, being for others, living in such a way that reflects your compassion and concern for others what's the worst that could happen to you? Somebody might disrespect you? We do live in a cynical world, and Christ-like could be mistaken for naïve or foolish. Somebody might try to take advantage of you, mistaking what they see for weakness. Well, following Christ does not mean giving up your spine, or your discernment, or your courage. In fact they become even more important. Jesus himself was aware of how great the challenge was, and he counseled us to be innocent as doves, yet wise as serpents. And after all, the serpent was the one that introduced to us the knowledge of good and evil. Putting that knowledge to use in the world with love is Christ-like and it has the power to reshape the world.

Lord your summons echoes true when you but call my name.

Let me turn and follow you and never be the same.

In Your company I'll go where Your love and footsteps show.

Thus I'll move and live and grow in you and you in me.

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There is an extraordinary power that is unleashed when we turn and follow Jesus, for as we grow in Christ, we create more moments of Christ in the world. Christ grows just like love. It's true the more love you give away, the more you have. And the more you sow the seeds of love, and respect, the more it grows in others. Call it the divine law of supply and demand. Knowing that you are loved changes you; I think it makes you better because suddenly you realize that you are someone else's focus. What you do and feel takes on a new flavor because others are investing themselves in your life. Now turn that around and realize that when you interest yourself and invest in another, you change them. You assure them of their worth. It can be as simple as those jars of peanut butter you brought this morning. And please don't ever underestimate what the peanut butter mean. Stop and consider the child who will eat peanut butter on toast before going to school and you realize that it's not trivial. But for you she might go to school hungry; your gift has told her that she matters.

The times of economic anxiety in which we find ourselves right now seem more and more to me as a summons to consider our common life anew. The festival of the self-centered pursuit of material wealth has led to Bernie Madoff style corruption, the abuse of promises and commitments, crime and now a long agonizing fall. But for this trial we might not consider that we have an opportunity to revision our common financial life. Leaving self behind in a national or global economy means to consider the needs of the poorest and the middle class and the disenfranchised along side of the bottom line. Our baptismal covenant summons us into respect for the dignity of every human being. There is little dignity in poverty. There is little dignity in feeling that you have no options and that no one cares. Every moment of compassion for someone else's need is a Christ moment. Leaving ourselves behind may just be the best chance that we have to pull out of this bleak time. The things that Jesus offered to us are not merely religious concepts – they are not just for Christians – they are the best hope for our life together on earth. Imagine a people that became Christ like for the whole world.

Would you come and follow me if I but call your name?

** This lovely hymn is from the Iona Community in Scotland. The lyrics are by John Bell and Graham Maule. I thank them.*