

Sermon: Year A, II Epiphany

Texts: Isaiah 49:1-7

I Corinthians 1:1-9

John 1:29-42

I can't really say that I grew up during the age of chivalry. Thirty years ago it wasn't yet dead, but many were already claiming, some gladly and others with notable sadness, that it was mortally wounded. Equality was all the rage – even to the point of challenging and slowly changing the long-standing habits of our youthful romances, and the demise of the last vestiges of chivalry's honor was assumed to be just a matter of time. Nonetheless, as high school students, once a year, we were reminded of just how coded and structured our romantic interactions were, by the reversal of the roles to which we were accustomed. We were informed that a specific date had been designated Sadie Hawkins Day, and for us, this meant that the young women of our school were suddenly given the exceptional freedom of being the ones who could pursue their own interests rather than waiting or hoping that, somehow, romance would come to them.

When we arrived at school on that day, great long tables were set up in the hallways and hundreds of bright carnations were spread out on them. Young women could purchase flowers and then send them, along with a note or an invitation, to the persons of their choice. And all day long, classes were interrupted by the delivery of bouquets. With a knock at the door, the lecture on Chaucer would stop, and all eyes would turn to see who would be the recipient of these tokens of affection, and who, receiving them, would register delight or dismay or distress.

I remember those days as being luxurious in anticipation. The usual order was temporarily erased. It gave the impression that anything could happen. Students weren't doing something that couldn't be done on any given day. Rules weren't being broken. But by broad declaration and with enthusiastic exhortation, young women were urged to make their wishes known. And for many young men, this afforded them the very rare experience of being the ones who were being asked, or beckoned, quite apart from anything that they had initiated themselves. It seemed magical in a way: at any given moment there could come a knock, a gift, a proposition perhaps, and maybe the surprise of something completely unexpected – a message, a sentiment, words addressed to them. Gone were all the usual anxieties. For this one day, boys didn't have to sweat, figuring out how to approach someone and begin a conversation. They didn't have to rehearse what they were going to say, how they were going to move from casual conversation to personal questions. They didn't have to fret about how to deal with rejection and disappointment. Somebody had inquired after them, with eagerness, and they had, then, the pleasure of being able to respond, already knowing that someone desired their company and their friendship.

For a day everything seemed tinged with the excitement of possible revelation, of finding that someone, who we never suspected, had the courage to declare her attraction first...And sometimes, this made all the difference.

In a very small but perhaps helpful way, the reversal we experienced on Sadie Hawkins Day may serve to illuminate the Gospel text we have heard this morning from John. It is the beginning of John's account of the gathering of Jesus' disciples, which, all too easily and too often is taken as

merely a perfunctory tale. Leaders need followers. Stories need beginnings. Movements need dedicated workers. Jesus needed a small band of cohorts to help him along the way of his ministry. Dull stuff. Housekeeping. A few interactions, a few names, a couple of claims, and then we can get underway, moving on to the more important and substantial episodes in the Gospel. Or even worse, we can read this passage as simply a moralistic text. Religion, after all, is all about responsibility and threat, and therefore, our responsibility, as dutifully shown in this reading, is to follow Jesus as Andrew and Simon did. We should drop everything, leave home, leave job, leave family, leave every attachment for the sole purpose of serving God. To be a disciple is an obligation, a task of devotion, hard but worthy. That's common rhetoric within the church, which, sometimes, does have its place. But not here and not this early. It tends only to make a story that's already dull altogether deadly.

There is, however, real beauty in this story, and its beauty is the way it leads from our inquiring after God to the immediate reiteration by John that it is actually God who inquires after us. Subtly, but clearly, before we can get underway, our usual presumptions are overturned. As soon as Jesus' ministry begins, its beginning is rooted in his own seeking and his own inviting. We are not the ones who pursue God, wondering, speculating, striving after an ultimate or eternal goal at the very far reach of life and our imagination. In truth, it is God who pursues us. We are the object of God's ceaseless desire. John's explication of this is masterful. Before even the first chapter of the Gospel has ended, he has moved from the vast breadth of God's primacy in creation itself to the singular particularity of God incarnate calling his disciples by name, drawing them into a new and intimate relationship.

Contrary to so many of the presumptions of our age, it is not we who have initiated ideas of God, spinning stories that enfold in mystery the things that we have not yet come to understand. God is not a cultural artifact of our own designing, made in our image to serve our desires. We do not stand independently and from the vantage point of our two feet, firmly planted, project the kind of God we would like, or wrestle with the image we have happened to inherit. What John declares, with conciseness and depth, is rather that, at every step, God's word already precedes our own. God always speaks first, and we, in every instance, then, are given the unusual luxury of being free to respond. John does not just tell us of a relatively mundane event (as if to merely inform us that this happened, long ago). He is, in fact, pointing out the central grammar of God's interactions with us. Before there was a world, there was God's voice. Creation itself is the response to God's speaking. Before the word, there was nothing, and all that is, answers to what God has asked. "In the beginning was the word," said John, and it was this same word that became a human being, and it was this same human being who sought the twelve with whom he would be closest. The whole testimony of the Bible is the disclosure of this unexpected precedence: faith is not our seeking; it's actually our responding, responding to the gifts that we have already and continually receive.

By habit, we tend to believe otherwise. We have learned to see the world, not as gift, given or provided, but as brute fact, from out of which we must construct our own livelihood. So we invent. We manufacture. We manipulate. We query and imagine. And in all these ways, we lift ourselves up by our own bootstraps. We are the initiators, who, in the long progression of history, have struggled to raise ourselves up. Life is competition, a competing for survival that is

ceaseless and, ultimately, for many, merciless. And making a name for ourselves is our own work, left to us.

This is where John interrupts. His Gospel is a knock at the door and the delivery of a most surprising message. The world is not brute fact, he claims. It's the material expression of God's love. Its functioning is not merely the determination of natural laws, derived from nowhere. This is a woeful reduction. Creation's unfolding, even within the cycles of the day, even to this moment, is first and primarily the voice of God's joy that continually re-echoes the assessment pronounced in the beginning. This is good. This is my gladness. You, God announces, are the very object of my hope and, because of my hope, you are the very objects my passion. I am asking. And it is your freedom to answer as you will.

In more ways than we can imagine, our lives are God's invitation to rejoice with him – or maybe I should say, in the light of John's reversal, and in keeping with Sadie Hawkins... with *her*, with the one who, unexpectedly, sends a world of flowers.

God invites us to live in the luxury of this anticipation and realization.

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