

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
Jody McDevitt, co-pastor

January 15, 2017
2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
John 1:35-42; 2 Corinthians 4:5-7

Come and See

At last I am going to explain this artwork on the screen! It's called *The Journey*, and it's by one of the brothers of the Taizé Community in France, that ecumenical Christian community whose beautiful short songs and chants have spread around the world. "The Journey" is, of course, a perfect metaphor for a confirmation class because it is a metaphor for Christian life, and in this painting, the figure in yellow suggests to me Jesus, inviting the other two figures to "come and see," the invitation we read in today's gospel story.

Or perhaps the person in yellow is not Jesus himself, but a Christian, leading two others on the road towards the hospitality of God. Either way, this is the image which began the confirmation journey of the young people who are here to profess their faith this morning. And while each Christian journey is unique and individual, there are common threads which tie us together. We journey towards God.

Some of us are more intentional than others about our journeys. We're here this morning for varied reasons. For some, it's simply habit, what we do on Sunday mornings. For some, it's because we wanted to see or make friends, and be in community. For some, it's deeply personal, a search for truth, a search for redemption from life's struggles, a search for peace. For some, it's because we cannot imagine life apart from church, because through church we have found meaning and purpose for living. Whatever your reason, Christ offers his welcome to you as he did his first disciples. They asked, "Where are you staying?" And when he said, "Come and see," they came, and saw, and listened, and stayed with him. Who knew they would see what they saw, hear what they heard, experience the complete disruption and transformation of their lives? Who knew it would be for the rest of their lives?

The Christian journey begins by accepting an invitation from Christ, or from one of Christ's followers, to "come and see." Somewhere on that journey, because it is a spiritual journey, we encounter the mystery of God. This image is entitled "Starshowers," by artist Rick Delanty. We used it in the confirmation class to begin talking about baptism, a journey through waters that signifies and seals us to Christ. The picture also captures for me the broad expanse of the unknown, our smallness in relation to the immensity and beauty of the created world, and the gift of being invited into both danger and the assurance of divine protection on our journey towards God.

"What are you looking for?" Jesus asked the curious potential disciples. More than 200 years ago, theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher defended religion to those he called its "cultured despisers." We have many "cultured despisers" of religion in our culture today, who think superior knowledge has proven religion to be outdated. Schleiermacher wrote of the human quest for something beyond ourselves, what he called our "taste for the infinite." In the 20th century, theologian Paul Tillich called that same something "the ground of our being." (*Feasting on the Gospels*, John, vol. 1, Westminster John Knox Press, 2015, p. 34) Today we recognize that longing in those who identify themselves as "spiritual but not religious." Well, we are here today because we claim a religious path toward the infinite, the ground of our being, that which is beyond ourselves. Christ leads us on the path through the waters. He shows us God in a form we can begin to understand, just enough to give us the direction in life we need. Because we can't do it by ourselves.

We seek connection with God, and our faith tradition helps us to know how to pray. This painting is called *Girl Praying*, by artist George Tooker. We pray as individuals, and we pray in

community. Over the years, it's my observation that one of the most intimidating aspects of Christian community for so many people is praying out loud, with other people listening. This year I struck upon a way to teach this class of young people how to get over that fear. I used Anne Lamott's formulation, that there are really only three kinds of prayers. Help, thanks, and WOW. (*Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*, 2012, Riverhead Books, New York) Am I feeling the need to ask God for help, or do I want to say thank you to God for something, or am I simply awed by God and want to offer my praise? Of course, this formula isn't only for public praying. It helps us get over any fear of praying we may have—I don't have the words, I'm not good enough, I don't know how to begin, I can't concentrate long enough. Sometimes we need to listen to what God is saying to us. Sometimes we simply need to be still in the presence of God. But always, we need to pray. Prayer is God's gift to us to keep us connected to our source.

And while prayer is very personal, it is also what we do when we are together in worship. We pray through music, we pray through listening to scripture, we pray silently and we pray aloud, and prayer binds us together with one another and with God. Worship is the heart of Christian community, the body of Christ at prayer. On a Christian journey, worship is essential.

Because worship is the gathering of the community around Christ, where individual disciples support and encourage one another, teach one another and hold one another accountable. Worship is where all the "one anothers" meet—greet one another, welcome one another, bear one another's burdens, bear with one another, live in harmony with one another, be kind to one another, confess to one another, pray for one another, love one another. This image of community is entitled *The Invitation*, by Nancy Earle. When the confirmation class began reflecting on community by learning more about communion, this image helped us remember that Christ's community includes young and old, men and women, and is always open to welcome wanderers and sojourners and seekers to be part of the circle. It helped us remember that God—Creator, Christ, and Spirit, Father, Son, and Spirit—is love in community, a trinity of relationship. It helped us talk about the Spirit, represented here by the dove. And this image reminded us that the table of mercy and grace is Christ's table, not our own, and the spiritual nourishment he offers there is for all who wish to be part of his community.

And although a traditional course of preparation for confirmation tends to have discrete topics to "cover," the truth is that the Christian life is interwoven with everything else going on in our lives. So while these young persons were learning about the Lord's Supper and the Trinity, they were also showing up to help in Sunday school, helping pack boxes for Operation Christmas Child, making 24 hygiene kits for Church World Service, and building bonds of friendship and support among themselves.

The last image that guided the confirmation journey is called *God's Ecstasy*, by Ansgar Holmberg. Life in Christ is joyful, exuberant, colorful, and creative. Life in Christ is connected to the earth, all living creatures, the sun, moon and stars. Life in Christ is a joyful dance, for it draws us nearer to the goodness God pronounces over all creation and desires for us. Life in Christ is life eternal, overcoming sin and death. Life in Christ is God's ecstasy, and the way for humans to join God in celebration.

Which can take many forms. The Irish rock band U2 wrote a song in the late 80s called "I still haven't found what I'm looking for." Bono, the lead singer, describes it as "a gospel song with a restless spirit." Google it and you can see different renditions of it on youtube, from a young Bono in Las Vegas singing about the human search for God, and all the empty, fruitless answers to that search we try, to the same rock band singing the same song of yearning for God with a gospel choir in Harlem. "I still

haven't found what I'm looking for," they sing, but when that choir gets to the part about "I believe in Kingdom come then all the colors will bleed into one," there is joy in their faces. For it's clear that the search is answered by Christ, and that even though their journey continues, the singers know that Christ's road is the way.

The confirmation journey doesn't end with a graduation ceremony because none of us have completely found what we're looking for. Who knows the ethical dilemmas we will face in life? Who knows the heartbreaks of relationships, or the struggle to find one's vocation, or the suffering in mind or body we may endure? "Come and see," says Jesus, and when we see that maybe HE is what we're looking for, he sends us out. But we keep coming back to learn more and grow more and be more. The life of faith is as long as our physical life, and just as our bodies need daily food and exercise, the same is true of our spiritual lives. There's always more to learn, because there's always more to live.

I'll leave you with one more image of a disciple's life. The apostle Paul tells us that we are like clay jars, made to hold Christ's light. There's nothing perfect or permanent about a clay jar. But it can hold a light, a light that shines so others can see. The light is the knowledge of the glory of God. In this little light shines all of God's hopes, all of God's truth, all of God's love. And we have been given this treasure.

Come and see, says Jesus. Join the journey. And on that journey, let your light shine so others might give all the glory to God.