

Behold the Lamb of God: An Invitation

Homily on John 1: 35- 42

There was a young man who showed up at St. Peter's desk at the Pearly Gates one day-- about 35 years old, and not very big, maybe 5'10" and 150 pounds. St. Peter said: "You know, for our records, we like to ask people what the best thing was they did for someone else when they were on earth. Can you think of something that was really good you did for someone else?"

"Sure," said the young man. "There was a time I was driving down the road and saw a big biker gang that had surrounded this young woman, and were clearly harassing her pretty aggressively. So I stopped, jumped out of my car, and barged into the center of the group, knocking over a couple of bikes in the process."

"Then I stared right at the guy who looked like the leader-- maybe 6'5" and 300 pounds-- and said: 'You guys think you're so tough ganging up on this girl when there are 10 of you and one of her. Let her go and I'll invite any one of you to come here and show me what you've got.'"

"Wow," said St. Peter, "that was really brave."

"Not really," said the young man. "I figured that like most bullies they were all talk and no action, so they'd back down."

"So," St. Peter asked, "when did you do this?"

"Just a few minutes ago," the man answered.

Guess someone must have taken the young man up on his invitation after all.

There is a lot of inviting going on in today's readings as well. In our first reading from the book of the prophet Samuel we see the Lord call to Samuel three times before Eli tells him what is going on and Samuel responds to the Lord's call.

And in the reading from John's Gospel there are three invitations as well-- John the Baptist invited the crowd to recognize Jesus when John says "Behold"-- look at-- "The Lamb of God." Then Jesus tells the two disciples who wonder where He is staying to "come and you will see." And finally, after Andrew spends time with Jesus, Andrew brings his brother, Simon, to Jesus, where he is renamed Peter.

And of course this affirmative reaching out to people, this inviting folks to become followers of Jesus, isn't something that happens just in these passages. We often hear Jesus say to those who will become his disciples: "Come and follow me."

It seems like this direct inviting of people to become Jesus' followers is one of the central ways that Jesus and His disciples used to begin to build the Church.

And I wonder if that practice of direct invitation isn't something we might think about using more in our day, because it can be very effective.

Let me tell you two stories about invitations. The first has to do with our friends and neighbors at Mt. Olivet Lutheran Church, which is at 50th and Knox or so. It is the largest Lutheran congregation in the US, and one of the largest in the world. How did they get that way? I don't really know, but the other day I was talking with one of my friends about Mt. Olivet and my friend told me that when he and his wife and their three sons moved into their house at 51st and Colfax in the mid- 1980's, they were sitting in their living room one afternoon about two weeks after they moved in and the door bell rang.

At the door was Reverend Paul Youngdahl, pastor of this huge church, who introduced himself and asked if he could come in for a moment. His message was simple-- I'm the pastor at Mt. Olivet down the street, and just want to welcome you to the neighborhood, and to let you know that if you're looking for a church, we'd be honored to have you join us next Sunday.

My friend told Pastor Youngdahl that his family was Catholic and they'd already joined Annunciation Parish, and Pastor Youngdahl was gracious and said: "I'm not here to take people

away from some other church. Just know that if you're ever looking for someplace else, you always have a home at Mt. Olivet," and said goodbye.

30 years later my friend was still impressed at the invitation.

My other invitation story has to do with why I'm here. People sometimes ask me how I got interested in being a deacon, and I tell them that it started with a neighbor down the street. The neighbor was in Bible Study Fellowship, BSF, which is an excellent bible study which has its roots in the southern Baptists. One day the neighbor asked my wife if she'd like to join her and attend one of the BSF classes. My wife said: "Yes," and went to the class, and loved it.

Pretty soon she joined BSF and after she'd been at BSF for a couple of years one morning I woke up and thought I should join it as well. So I did. And after I'd done BSF for several years and was looking around for something else, I mentioned that to people at work, and one of them said: "You should think about being a deacon," which up to that point had never crossed my mind.

And so here I am-- the invitation from the neighbor leading to the suggestion from the co-worker to my being here.

That's really how the Church grows, and we're all called in our own way to say "Behold the Lamb of God." We are all called to make disciples of all nations, and one of the best ways to do that is for us to invite folks directly.

And that's a job for all of us. I don't want people to hear me and say that Fr. Mark needs to get out and knock on doors. That's not the point.

All of us have the obligation, the privilege, the honor really of spreading the good news of the Gospel-- it isn't just the job of the priest or the deacon, as the example of the neighbor down the street and BSF should make clear.

So I'd like to challenge the community today to be people who invite others to Christ. And I mean invite-- not just welcome. We're really good at welcoming folks who come here, I think, but inviting is a whole additional level of effort, of risk really, of putting yourself out there.

But if we think about it I bet we all know people who we could invite to St. Richard's, who we could offer to drive to Mass, or who we could ask if they'd like to be in one of the Lenten small groups that we're just forming. Or maybe it is literally greeting new people in the neighborhood and mentioning St. Richard's to them.

Right before we receive communion Fr. Mark will invite us to look at Jesus as he holds up the consecrated host and says: "Behold the Lamb of God." It is up to us to take that invitation and pass it on every chance we get.