

ST. THOMAS EPISCOPAL CHURCH
KNOXVILLE, TENNESSEE
The Third Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A
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JESUS WANTS YOU! (Matthew 4:12-23)
Howard Bowlin+

One of my early memories of childhood is traveling into Collinsville, Illinois to visit the Post Office. Once a week or so, my mother, younger brother, and I would venture forth for that grand old building that I have ever after judged every other post office building by, and found them wanting in architectural style.

There we would purchase stamps, "penny" post cards, and the occasional United States Savings Bond (the latter two items surely dating me). My brother and I also would always want to look at the "wanted posters," that still being the time of the F.B.I.'s "Most Wanted List."

There was another poster that we always saw as well. This was a poster that stood in a metal frame on the sidewalk outside the building. It depicted a stern-looking, elderly gentleman. He wore a stove-pipe hat decorated in red and blue stripes with stars surrounding the brim. He had a white goatee and a name, Uncle Sam. He fixed his steely eyes on yours and pointed a finger toward the viewer. And the caption read, "He wants you!" That poster made a deep impression on those two young boys.

The title of this sermon is "Jesus Wants You!" Originally, I was going to title it "Jesus Needs You," but I decided that I didn't want to be tried for heresy. You see, "Jesus Needs You!" is heretical. Christ Jesus is the Son of God, the second Person of the Holy Trinity, begotten not made, and all the rest of what we say in the Creed. Jesus is the Christ. Jesus doesn't need anybody. Jesus doesn't need anything. That is sloppy thinking about whom and what Jesus is.

What is true is that Jesus wants you. And there is a very big difference between wanting and needing, isn't there? I think about Jesus wanting us every time I walk into this building. I think about that as I ponder an upcoming vestry retreat where the vestry and I will plan what we say we are going to do, and how we can measure whether we accomplish what we say we are going to do.

Let me say it again, it is good that we do this.

On the other hand, also let me remind us all that according to the Mission Statement of St. Thomas Church, "... we as a Parish and individuals will work to be a worshipping family which grows in the presence of Christ. We will strive to bring God's love to each other, our neighborhood, and the world."

And that's God's love as revealed to us in Christ Jesus. Absolutely everything else, however worthy, is secondary. Jesus Wants You! At the very beginning of his public ministry Jesus realized he wanted helpers to accomplish his work after he left the earth. Today's Jesus still wants helpers to complete his mission: to seek and serve the lost, to bring knowledge and healing to the world.

And what a world it is in which we live. This has not been a good week for news. The global economy continues to be unstable. There are devastating floods and earthquakes in different parts of the globe. Our local newspapers bring daily reminders of "humanity's inhumanity to man." And, the bloody stories keep coming globally from around the world, even if they are no longer "news" and get buried in the back pages.

I will say it again. Today's Jesus still wants helpers to complete his mission: to seek and serve the lost, to bring knowledge and healing to the world.

Several years ago two boys were riding their bikes home after watching a Saturday matinee downtown. Now earlier that morning the boys had attended, at their church, what must have been a rather uplifting Confirmation class lesson because as they were riding along one of the boys began loudly singing a hymn.

Now the boy who was not singing had put up with his friend's singing until they began riding down the quiet boy's street. Then he told the singer outright, "Shh—stop that singing! Be quiet." To which the other boy stopped singing and said, "What's the matter? Are you ashamed of the Gospel? Are you afraid to tell others about Jesus?"

"Of course I'm not ashamed!" said the quiet boy, but do you have to tell the whole neighborhood?"¹ Is that the way we are?

One weekday morning when I was in seminary, one of the students preached a peculiar sermon. He got up in the pulpit and said, "What is really important in our Christian faith is summed up in the words 'Look to Jesus!'" Then he was silent for about a minute. . . . Then he said, "Look to Jesus!" . . . Then he was silent for another minute, and said, "Look to Jesus!" . . . Silence. . . . "Look to Jesus!" By this time we got the picture. This went on for ten minutes. Then he sat down.

The student thought he was being creative. The faculty, needless to say, did not share his opinion. The rest of us were either embarrassed or bored. Some people were angry. It was crazy. He was partly correct—we ought to look to Jesus. But we need to do more than just look.

When Jesus said to those fishermen, "Follow me," he was not looking for groupies to massage his ego, or just for them to sit around drinking at the trough. "Follow me" is what grammarians call an "imperative." "Close the door" is an imperative—it is a call to action. It is a different way of expressing a thought. It is different from saying, "Please, if you are not too busy (I wouldn't want to cause you any undue stress or anxiety, and I certainly don't want to offend you or any other living creature in the cosmos), but could you perhaps close the door, that is unless you would rather leave it open, in which case I will humbly give in to your clearly more worthy desires."

No! "Follow me" means action. The theologian, Karl Barth, said that Christian evangelism is often like a man who, walking down the sidewalk, suddenly looks up, begins to point toward the sky, toward the tops of buildings along the street. What happens? Soon, a crowd begins to gather. People busily walking down the street stop, stare upward, become curious about what the man is pointing at. Others look too; then they point. "See, up there, look," they say to the gathering crowd.

Christians, in the strict sense of the word, are those who have seen something, namely, the advent of God into our world as Jesus the Christ. They have heard something, namely, the voice of God calling to them over the cacophony of other voices and noises. Voices and noises like those that we have heard in the newspapers and televisions this past year. These people want to tell others what they have seen and heard. The gospel, the Good News of God in Christ Jesus, is still capable of drawing a crowd when we point to it.

I say it a third time—today's Jesus still wants helpers to complete his mission: to seek and serve the lost, to bring knowledge and healing to the world. That is a call to action. Jesus wants you!

¹John Flamme, in *Deffner* (1992), 24f.