

January 15, 2012

Second Sunday after Epiphany

John 1:43-51

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

The Rev'd Noelle York-Simmons, associate rector

I've spent time all up and down the eastern United States. Up in New York and New Haven, they made fun of my southern accent. Down here, folks are usually surprised to find out that I'm a native Atlantan because, as I'm often reminded, I don't really sound like one.

Well, I am one, born and bred and, while I don't usually sound so southern, I have a deep and abiding affection for the word "y'all". I think it is one of the south's greatest gifts to the English language, topping even such golden goodies as "yonder" and "catawampus" or "ain't".

I'm not linguist, but I've dabbled in enough languages to know that English is one of the few languages out there that doesn't—officially-- have a second person plural. When we say "Did you go to the party?" We might mean "did you, individual person with whom I'm speaking, go to the party?" or we might mean, "did you and your whole family go?" Context is important, but there is occasionally still confusion.

Which is why I like "y'all". It rolls of the tongue so nicely and helps us say exactly what we mean. Y'all is that second person plural that we're missing. If only the rest of the English speaking world would get on board!

For example, if the translators of today's Gospel passage weren't so afraid of the word "y'all", this Gospel would be much clearer.

This is the third in a series of "next days" in the Gospel of John. Jesus has been traveling around gathering disciples. By the time of this reading, he has already attracted Andrew who in turn pulled in his brother Simon Peter. Over these last couple of days, Jesus is amassing identities: The Lamb of God, the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit, the Son of God, Rabbi, Messiah. His new disciples are naming him, marking him, trying to figure him out as they accept his invitation to travel along with him.

Philip is the next one to answer the call, we hear today. It isn't a complicated call. There's nothing terribly poetic about what he says: "Follow me." That's it. Just as he called Philip's predecessors with "Come and see." And that's how Philip calls Nathanael, "Come and see."

In order for something as simple as "come and see" to work, there has to be something there to see. Perhaps not literally see, like a stadium-sized flat screen TV or a three-ring circus act, but there has to be a *there* there. That is, enough

there to believe in, enough meaning-making, enough community, enough *whatever* to fill the hole in that new disciple's heart.

And furthermore, the caller has to believe in the faith, believe in the power of Jesus to change lives, that it shines through in that “come and see.” I do not believe that Jesus practiced some sort of Jedi mind tricks on these disciples. Instead, I think Jesus knew that what he was asking these men to do—leave the familiar and the easy and change their lives in order to change the world—was not just worth it, but it was necessary. Necessary for the hearts and minds and souls of Andrew and Simon Peter and Philip and Nathanael and necessary for the hearts and minds and souls of all of us who have come along since then.

Which brings us back to our second person plural.

Before the dubiously dubbed doubting Thomas, there was doubting Nathanael. Nate's first response to Philip's request to meet the Messiah is “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Nathanael is from Nazareth's biggest rival. So his response is akin to a Georgia Tech grad saying, “But he went to UGA.”

So what does Philip say? “Come and see.” He believes enough in what he has to show his friend that the conviction of his words convinces Nathanael to give this archrival a chance. Come and see.

Skeptical Nathaniel follows. And he comes to believe.

First, Jesus addresses Nathanael individually, offering details of Nathanael's life that only someone close to him might know. Nathanael is known by this stranger, known in an intimate way that touches him and causes him to proclaim Christ as the Son of God and by a new moniker, the King of Israel. Jesus' attention to him, personally, individually, turns his heart in favor of this new, compelling stranger.

But that's not all, says Jesus. It isn't just that Jesus knows Nathanael, that he saw straight into his heart, there is more.

It is here that Jesus goes from you—as in you, Nathanael—to “y'all”, as in “y'all new believers” or “all y'all whose doubt is fading into faith.” This is where we could use this “y'all” to understand that Jesus is reaching across time and culture and speaking to us, all of us. This is that second person plural that involves even more than those standing nearby, but the multitudes of us that find our hearts turning in favor of this compelling figure, this rabbi, this Messiah.

The Gospel of John promises this for all. We will all see this vision of heaven. We will all see these angels of God as Jacob did. We will all know the place upon which we stand to be God's place. We all stand to be inspired by the world God has created. We are all invited to take part.

Philip's invitation to Nathanael, "Come and see!" is, properly translated, "Y'all come!" and this invitation reminds us of two things: first that we *are* so invited. We are invited to give in to the turning of our hearts to the Gospel, to the Messiah. We are invited to be inspired and uplifted and changed. We are invited to be known. We are invited and God is awaiting our response...

Second, Philip's "y'all come" reminds us that evangelism—that is, the spreading of this good news—begins, every time, with an invitation and now that we are the chosen disciples, that invitation must be issued forth from our own mouths.

Just as Andrew invited Peter and Philip hooked Nathanael, it is now our turn to go out into the world and say, in whatever dialect, language, word or action we choose, "y'all come!"

If we, like Philip, like Jesus, believe deeply in the message that we propose, if we really do believe that our world is made better for the presence of God in it, then others will be compelled to accept the invitation. In this way, we spread this word, we spread this love. We will see greater things than even those miracles that take place among us every day. In this way, we will see heaven opened before us.

Y'all come.