



Come and See

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given January 15, 2017
The Second Sunday after the Epiphany: John 1:29-42*

This past Wednesday our confirmation students had the great honor of having a guest, a Buddhist monk named Busho. I visited with Busho a bit after the evening's events had concluded and he told me that he had had a delightful time with our young people, and that they had surprised him. Apparently he taught them about Buddhism, and they were running out of time. He offered them the chance to just skip the five minute meditation he had planned for them so that they could get to Compline on time. They all said no, we really want to try the meditation. And so they all sat, in total silence, for five minutes – a bunch of eighth and ninth graders. Busho was moved and surprised that they would feel this way.

And I wonder how many of us, if we are honest, hunger for true, honest, vulnerable silence. In this tradition, our common worship has many words, and they are beautiful words. When we leave here, we have become increasingly accustomed to filling our moments with distraction. Screens are ever-present. The other day my daughter Carly had to go to the orthodontist and she was wondering what she could do while she sat in the orthodontist chair. Could she bring an iPad? Would they have something for her to do? But underneath that frenzy of busy-ness, underneath the pull toward filling our time, I wonder if many of us might not feel a hunger for intentional silence. For a practice in which we face ourselves and the world and God honestly, without immediately imposing values or thoughts or analysis on it. I wonder what that yearning for silence is about. Do you yearn for this kind of quiet? Is it about relief from constant sensory stimulation or work? Are we seeking peace? Are we seeking spaces in which we can actually listen to our own hearts and to the voice of God?

In today's gospel text, Jesus has just been baptized, and John the baptizer, who was sent for the express purpose of preparing the world for Jesus, has just explained to his disciples that even though he's been looking for Jesus all along he hadn't recognized

Jesus when they met – it was only a sign from God that helped him recognize Jesus. But once John points Jesus out to his disciples, some of them leave John and go follow Jesus. When Jesus realizes they are following him, he stops. And, then, as it seems many spiritual masters would do, he asks them a question. What are you seeking? It's a straightforward question. But it's not simple. What *are* they seeking, these disciples who have attached themselves to unusual teachers like fiery John the Baptist with his camel's hair and desert baptisms, and then to this itinerant wandering teacher Jesus who has come out of nowhere and is what no one expects? And when Jesus asks them this question, I have to laugh at their answer. The best they can come up with is "Where are you staying?" What's your address, Jesus? But Jesus, who the gospels describe as constantly meeting people exactly where they are at, just replies with an invitation. Come and see, he says. And so they do, and they stay with him for the rest of that day, and that day is enough to lead them to another day, and another, and another, with this wandering teacher whose presence and simple power was a shock wave whose effects have not yet ceased in this world, 2000 years later.

What you may not realize is that in this simple interchange in John's gospel is a clue to the themes of that gospel. I hope you'll forgive me for getting a little academic for a minute. When the disciples ask Jesus where he is staying, the Greek word for "staying" is the word *meno*. *Meno* means a lot of things: it means staying, resting, remaining, abiding. It is a word that recurs throughout John's gospel and it is the same word you might remember Jesus using when he tells his disciples to abide in his love. I am the vine, he says, and you are the branches; abide in me. It is the same word that John uses when he describes the Spirit descending like a dove and remaining on Jesus. It is the word that John's gospel uses over and over again in many different ways to describe the kind of relationship God has with Jesus and the kind of relationship that we are invited to have with Jesus, which is about presence. It is about a holy intimacy. It is about staying. It is about being, not doing. There is in this little word *meno* an open invitation to a deep, ongoing sense of being with Jesus that begins with something practical like the disciples' question "what is your address Jesus, where are you staying?" Where can I find you? But it doesn't stop there. This interchange between Jesus and his disciples is a quiet initiation into a relationship Jesus intends to end with the disciples becoming completely one with him, as he describes in his final prayer later in John's gospel.

There is in Christian tradition a deep contemplative strain, and perhaps many of us do not know about it. Today may seem like an odd day to bring it up. In our national life, we are about to inaugurate a new President. Many of us have strong feelings about that. I'm guessing in a room this size those feelings are both positive and negative. Many people are talking about a call to action, to protect the values they fear may not be honored under this new regime. Others are angry or contemptuous that there is so much resistance and protest and fear with this transition of power. What I want to say to all of you is that in the middle of this turmoil, we as followers of the way of Jesus are called to nonviolence and truth-telling and loving our neighbors and caring for the orphan and the widow, just the way we always are in every regime at all times in history. No doubt that call will involve action, and a lot of it, in the days ahead. But in order to sustain that life and that call, we need a deeper foundation. We need to recover the inner peace and clarity that comes, not only from doing the right thing in the world, but from resting in the presence of God in Christ, and receiving the gifts of wisdom and healing and humility that come from that relationship.

Some of you are familiar with Benedictine spirituality. St. Benedict was a man who cultivated the earliest kinds of monasteries in the Christian West fourteen hundred years ago, just as St. Anthony and St. Basil cultivated them in the Christian East. A contemporary Benedictine named Joan Chittister has written about the contemplative tradition alive within Christian Benedictine spirituality in a little book called *The Monastery of the Heart*. In that book, she writes,

Benedictine Prayer is not mindless repetition of endless formulas. It is about the immersion in the mind of God that living the God-life requires, if we are to be faithful to it all our living days. Prayer restores the soul that is dry and dulled by years of trying to create a world that never completely comes. It heals the wounds of the day and reminds us who we want to be at the deepest, truest part of us.¹

You see, the youths in the confirmation program were right on target with their yearning to try meditation. If we are honest, I think many of us crave that kind of silence which is not an escape from this world but the capacity to face it fully, honestly, without reacting, and immersed in the love and heart of God as we do so.

¹ Joan Chittister, *The Monastery of the Heart: An Invitation to a Meaningful Life* (Bluebridge, 2011) at 34.

And the invitation of Jesus echoes through the centuries since the encounter with his disciples. Where are you staying, Jesus? they ask. Come and see, he responds. This winter I will offer a short course on the Christian contemplative tradition, on practicing contemplative prayer. Our Deacon the Reverend Diane Elliott has long studied contemplative prayer and I know would be glad to walk with any of you in discovering it. Father Tom has resources along these lines too. Many of you have shared with me that you've already explored Benedictine spirituality in the past. The point isn't so much what form you use to become quiet and centered in the heart of God. The point is that as the noise around us increases, and maybe as the noise within us increases, we are invited to a deeper kind of listening, a more vulnerable kind of waiting, an honest silence in the presence of God. Come and see.