

Year A, 2017
Fr. Robert D. Arnold

Epiphany 2
St. John 1:29-47

+In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

“Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” So spoke John when he beheld Jesus. John’s baptism was one of repentance “for the forgiveness of sins” (Mk 1:4). It’s a subtle difference but an important one. Sins (plural) are individual or corporate acts of unfaithfulness to the covenant God has established with His people—acts of injustice, cruelty or evil. John called for repentance and his baptism was for the forgiveness of those acts. Jesus came to take away the sin of the world. Sins are individual or corporate acts—the symptoms of the underlying sin that is the human condition. Sin is the basic brokenness at the center of everything. Jesus came to take away the brokenness at the center of the world, at the center of society, and at the center of our lives.

Andrew and another of John’s disciples must have understood at some level this subtle difference between sins and sin. They followed Jesus afraid or perhaps just incapable of articulating the longing of their spirits. Jesus turned and asked, “What are you looking for?” Perhaps a better translation would be, “What are you searching for?” The best they could do for a response was to ask Him where He was staying. They wanted to know where He was living; in other words, what was at the center of His life. St. John uses the word “abide” throughout his gospel. They wanted to know where Jesus abides.

The gospel writer gives us details for a reason. This exchange takes place on the eve of the Sabbath. Jews measured time, not as we do from midnight to the next midnight, but following the example of Genesis, from evening to evening. The day began at sunset (roughly 6:00 p.m.) and ended at sunset (roughly 6:00 p.m.) 24 hours later. It was 4:00 in the afternoon, John tells us, on the eve of the Sabbath. It’s a detail easily missed by modern readers. In answer to the question, “Where do you abide,” Jesus invited them to “come and see.” The Sabbath will begin in two hours. No labor was allowed on the Sabbath—not even the labor of walking home. If they go with Jesus now they will be committed to spend the evening and the next day with Him. This is a major commitment of their time. You cannot understand what Jesus has to offer—taking away the brokenness at the

center of everything—on the basis of loose change and spare time. The invitation to “come and see” is more demanding than we might imagine. Andrew and the other disciple are intentionally committing to “abide” with Jesus.

What are you searching for? My guess is that it is not more information or an intellectual paradigm to follow but rather a place to abide, a home to inhabit, a people to be in community with and a story to tell. Where is that place where we can abide in harmony—harmony with God, with our environment, with each other, within ourselves? What we are searching for is the One who can take away the brokenness at the center of everything, including ourselves. So the question is: Are we willing to intentionally spend time with Jesus to discover that abiding place?

John the Evangelist tells us at several different point and with many different words that Jesus is at the center of the life of the world. “He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not” (1:10-11). Look around the world. Can you see Jesus at the center of the world? No, we can’t. We are blind to His presence and can no longer hear the sound of his steps in the garden. We know more about the universe—its makeup, how it works, even how it began—than did Andrew and the disciple; more than anybody who ever lived before us. Yet we still cannot see Jesus at the center. What we can see are all the things that have assumed His place.

There are all kinds of ideas and “isms” that want to claim our allegiance and take up residence at the center of the world, at the center of society, and at the center of our lives—capitalism, communism, parochialism, utopianism, tribalism, nationalism, to name just a few. Even in our religious life we can be infected by an idea or “ism” that sets us apart and divides us from our neighbors. In the mid-1800s there was a fever-pitched debate over Predestinarianism, the heresy that comes and goes through the course of church history, which reduces the eternal salvation of the elect as well as the eternal damnation of the reprobate to one cause alone, namely to the sovereign will of God, and thereby excludes the free co-operation of man in bringing about a happy or unhappy future in the life to

come. You are either a member of the elect or a member of the damned; no amount of grace or repentance could change your fate. Fr. Garland writes in his book that most of the rectors of Trinity avoided the controversy, wishing not to engage in conflict with their Presbyterian neighbors (then kitty-corner from us). One rector, however, decided to place an editorial in the newspaper condemning it which, I'm sure, fanned the flames for quite some time. Some say globalism has made the world a smaller and better place. Global communication has made possible our knowing what's happening on any given day on the other side of world. Trade throughout the world is a boon to all. Yet globalization is difficult. Trade policy is difficult to negotiate and even good policy can become unfair trade relations down the road. Cooperation with people with whom we don't see eye to eye (either because of distance or of ways) is difficult. Suspicion of the other and self-interest makes loving our neighbor nearly impossible. Conflict of self-interest, of weakening economies, and of mass migration is causing a pulling back from our global commitments. Nationalism is on the rise once again, beckoning for center stage. With that will come more competition and conflict.

Soon after Patty and I were married, nearly 35 years ago, we found ourselves arguing about little things and disagreeing about big things. It was your typical battle of the wills. It wasn't long before we had to stop and examine what was going on. It didn't take long for a wise pastoral counselor to spot the problem. He said, "You are still saying 'I'; you have not yet exchanged your 'I' for a 'We'". At the center of your lives you are still two individuals. At the center of a marriage is the 'We'". At that point, it clicked. The light came on and I fully realized what Jesus meant when He said "they are no longer two, but one." That's what we mean by the sacrament of marriage. Something is changed at the center of our lives—the "I" is replaced with "We."

We all have our self-interest at stake—we all have our "I". As I tell my confirmation classes, "sin" is spelled with a capital "I" in the center. Do we give it center stage? Even our Lord fell to His knees in the garden of agony and prayed for this "cup" of death to be removed. "Nevertheless," He then prayed, "not my will but yours." The "I" was replaced with "We".

This, above all, is what we've been searching for these 11 year—to abide in Christ and keep Him at the center of all our living. It's been an incredibly fruitful journey. Ours is that special relationship of priest and parishioner that is uniquely intimate and spiritual. You have welcomed Patty and me into your homes and into your hearts. Together, we have worked to advance the kingdom of God in our midst. We have invested our time, talent and treasure to do the work God has given us to do. We have raised nearly \$300,000 to improve and maintain our church facilities. We have grown in grace, in love, and in charity. We have shared moments of sadness and loss, times of joy and celebration. It's been a time of great harmony and we have prospered. I could not have asked for a better place to abide nor a finer place to end my active ministry. You have been a wonderful community of faith for Patty and I. I am so grateful to you. None of this would have happened without you and without God abiding with us. Now I step down to let another build upon what we have done and do those things which I leave undone.

“What are you searching for?” Jesus asked. “Lord, where do you abide?” “Come and see.”