

## Anniversary Sunday 2022

*The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see" (John 1:43-46).*

Suppose there was a young boy, who from birth has been locked up in an empty, whitewashed room without any natural light. This boy has been deprived of all outside exposure and experiences, except for his access to knowledge acquired through independent reading and studying. Then one day the young boy is released from his isolation. Upon exiting his cell, he sees for the first time the color red as he beholds a rose growing in a nearby garden. The boy, having spent years studying, could tell you everything there is to know about light and spectrums and how the eye perceives color. He could quote the technical definition that, "Color is the visual effect that is caused by the composition of the light reflected by objects". He could tell you how an apple absorbs all colored light rays except for the color red and reflects that color back to the human eye. But the interesting question to ask is does the boy learn something new about the color red by actually seeing it with his own eyes? Does beholding the actual red flower add anything new to his knowledge that he did not already know before seeing it? I think we would all say, yes; there is something new the boy learns about the color red in seeing it. We could think of many other examples like this one. Love and friendship come to my mind. You will never fully understand love by just studying the chemical reactions of the body or friendship by studying the biological need to live in community. But what exactly new do we learn by experiencing love or friendship firsthand that we couldn't otherwise learn by reading biology textbooks or studying sociology? We know there is something new we learn by experience, but what exactly that "something" is very hard to determine. Hence the great need for literature, poetry and music to express the

inexpressible. There is something in the firsthand encounter that escapes human explanation. We intuitively know this to be true, hence why we say things like, “well...you’ll just have to come and see for yourself”.

One can apply this same thought experiment to the knowledge of God. A person can know everything there is to know *about* God and yet not know God at all. A person can conclude by surveying the facts of creation that the universe really does reflect an intelligent design; a person can know God propositionally by studying the history of religion or cultural belief systems. But such knowledge would get a person no closer to knowing God. Why is that? To know God—truly, really, fully—we must encounter Him. Today we celebrate our anniversary as a congregation. It’s a good day to remind ourselves of why we did what we did to plant this congregation, and why we do what we do to continue its sacred work. We did not endure the years of sacrifice and hardship in order for this church to be just a place for us to learn *about* God. The church is not the same as a university or an academy. God cannot be fully known by simply applying our intellect to facts and history. A long time ago, we once took God at His Word: “Unless the Lord builds the house those who labor, do so in vain”. A long time ago, we took God at His Word: “Where two or three are gathered in My Name, there I am”. Are we still that same congregation, who takes God at His Word? I pray it is so. For where God’s Word is present, so is He. In the same way a person learns something new about the color red by seeing it, we too gain deeper knowledge by our encounter with God in worship. The Bible is not a history book, but the Living Voice of God. Each time we hear God’s Word we are hearing Christ our Savior speak to us in our time. As Lutherans we don’t much like talking about our feelings; it’s as if they somehow cheapen the moment. But our worship services need not be barren. There’s absolutely nothing wrong with saying that as we gather in this

place, we can feel God's presence. For a really beautiful service actually should give us a mystic sense of the Divine.

What more can we learn about God by meeting Him in worship each Sunday? Why bother even coming to church after you have finished Confirmation or attended Sunday school? These types of questions are just as silly as someone who asks, "What more can I learn about love than what I can discover by reading *Romeo and Juliet*?" It is here, in worship, we come to know God as He wants to be known; we experience His presence, we hear His voice, we receive His gifts, and we share in relationship with Him. The Church was instituted for just this purpose—to be a place of genuine encounter between God and man. We come to know God personally: the Father as *our* Creator, the Son as *our* Savior and the Holy Spirit as *our* Sanctifier. These wonders of God can't be known by the intellect they must be felt in the deepest part of our souls. Describing the presence of God is like trying to describe love. A thousand words will never do it justice, yet it's so simple even a child knows what love is. And the older I get, the more okay I am with this. Some things can't be explained for they touch the absolute boundary where the mind must inevitably fall silent; some things shouldn't be explained for the real joy is in the mystery. The joy is not knowing fully what we fully know. Sometimes what is most needed is for us just to take in the moment and not ruin it with words. To be quiet, and follow Philip's advice to Nathaniel: "Come and see".

Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Jeremy H. Mills