

Following Jesus past the crumbled walls

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

January 14, 2024

by Rev. Dave Le Grand

The invitation of Jesus, his call to disciples, "Come, follow me," is so powerful that disciples drop what they are doing and follow. But, that invitation that Phillip makes to his friend Nathanael, "Why don't you come and see?" might be even more compelling.

Imagine that moment. Nathanael's home is the village of Cana, very near to Jesus' hometown Nazareth. Hearing about Jesus immediately stirs up some preconceived ideas about Nazareth folk for Nathanael. It is not hard to find parallels today. Today's stereotypes and labels, the cognitive chunks we lump certain people into, or, consider the epidemic of misinformation and disinformation that too many people fall victim to on social media.

Phillip helped to break down a conceptual wall that held his friend Nathanael within.

When I was young, backpacking around Europe in 1989, the wall separating East and West Germany was destroyed. At the time, we all knew that many had died trying to escape East Berlin. It was a brutal time for the people of East Germany.

That Fall of 1989, I was invited to make a detour from my travels to join the protests at the Brandenburg Gate outside Berlin. I had the prospect of being arrested, something dangerous! If I had only known how peacefully it would be resolved, I might have decided differently. So, I did not accept that invitation. My friend graciously sent me a photo that she took of the of the Berlin Wall being demolished by protesters, and, now, that wall and Gate serve as a museum while people routinely pass between East and West Germany.

I began thinking about these walls – the walls that hold up, that protect the treasure of this St. Andrew's sanctuary. The walls of St. Andrew's Place, keeping well over 100 residents safe. But walls also do something else at the same time, don't they? Do they not also keep out, and prevent information from being shared? We don't intend for that to happen, but it is a trade off we make when we protect with walls.

It is humorous, the big mystery in Sudbury called St. Andrew's United Church.

"Where is St. Andrew's United Church?"

Then the punchline, "...Is it really inside that big apartment building?!"

It is a magnificent mystery, like a pearl inside of an oyster, envisioned by those leaders. But still, hidden, in a very real way, within walls. That makes you and me, all of us, so important. We are the Phillips of modern-day, sharing our faith with friends, loved ones, the Nathanaels out there who have preconceived ideas about church, or specifically about St. Andrew's United Church.

I remember my childhood in Oshawa, the streets were empty except for cars driving to one of the many churches on a typical Sunday morning. Not anymore. Perhaps I will surprise you by saying: I'm grateful that that church is not the destination of so many today! Why? Because, it means that our call, as modern-day Phillips, and I'll say modern-day Marys too – remember that after Jesus' death, the first ones to witness to

Jesus' resurrection were Mary of Magdala and Jesus' mother, Mary. We are those witnesses, to the good news that there is something amazing inside that big building, singing and praying and storytelling of worship, and the delicious treats and Gloria's hospitality afterwards.

There is more going on here, though, isn't there? There is the support that happens amongst us, and amongst the residents here at St. Andrew's Place. It is a truly unique and fragile ecosystem, where we all breathe the same air, we share the spaces. The problem is, though, that the walls keep others out, unless we invite them in – oh, and we have to open that front door to let them in!

I thank you, each of you, for the storytelling that you do about this church of ours – St. Andrew's, but also telling people about this United Church of Canada that is truly unique as well. Thank you for taking those opportunities, when people might be a bit cynical about church, about going downtown, about the big building and difficulty finding parking.

Thank you for responding with stories about community, about healing, times of feeling lost yet somehow, inexplicably being found by the love of God. We are a work in progress, that is for sure. Thank you for sharing with the Nathanaels in your life about the very real work that St. Andrew's does to support the wonderful agencies who care for the most vulnerable who struggle to find home, to find healing from addiction.

It is a remarkable treasure, still often hidden behind a wall. May we work together to break down the wall, and allow Nathanael in. Amen.