

## “Special”

John 1:43-51

The word “special” is one that can be found almost anywhere these days. It is a word we use to describe something that is set apart and out of the ordinary. Although it might be said that the use word special has become so commonplace, one wonders if it is really that special any more. Over the years, marketers have realized the power of the word “special.” If you want to get someone’s attention or give some incentive or a particular product some extra appeal, then it is important to include this adjective special. These days we grocery stores have aisles devoted to special products. Television schedules are filled with special programming. Video game releases include special editions. Menu boards in eateries inform us of “today’s specials.” Wineries and vintners release batches of wine that are labelled special reserve. I think it is safe to say that these special offerings give us evidence to the fact that there are many in this world who are looking for something special.

Things weren’t all that different for the first disciples of Jesus when they decided to follow him all those years ago. These were also individuals in search of something or someone special. Namely they were looking for the Messiah, the one believed to be God’s special person. The anointed one from God who would set things right for God’s people.

Some of them had believed that John the Baptist was the one who would bring them something special, yet John said to them don’t follow me, follow him! Then, in a section of text that appears just before the section that Ruth read for us this morning, we have the call of the disciple Nathaniel. When the disciples come and tell Nathaniel that they have found the Messiah, this fellow “Jesus from Nazareth.” Nathaniel’s immediate response was to say, “can anything good come out of Nazareth. In other words, “Is this guy really anything special?”

You see, the early disciples of Jesus all came from places and lived lives that many in their day and age wouldn’t have considered to be very special at all. The region of the Upper Galilee was far removed from the city of Jerusalem and the life of the temple. Jerusalem was the special place, that’s where all the action was, that’s where the somebodies were. Being from one of the villages or towns in the Galilee relegated people to nobody status, especially

when it came to their identity as Jews. The people who came from the villages of Capernaum, Magdala, Nazareth and the like. They were considered to be on the outskirts, the perimeter of life. They lived mundane, ordinary existences that consisted of things like farming and fishing. They spoke with funny accents.

The disciples likely wondered, would they ever make a name for themselves? Would their lives ever matter? When Jesus came along they had decided to follow him. They were looking for something special.

I believe all of us, deep down, crave being special...or associated with something special. There is a desire to be lifted up out of the mundane, to raise our status. The need to feel special is common to human beings. We want to know that we matter to others; we want to be seen. We strive to achieve some special status in the eyes of others; how we are viewed by others matters to us.

It's like the story of two fellows named Larry and Jim. Larry had recently met Jim at a business meeting and they were spending some time getting acquainted. They were sitting down watching the state of the union address one night and Larry, wanting to make an impression said to Jim, "You know, Barack and I go way back!"

Jim said, "Sure you do!"

Larry said, "No, really! Let me prove it to you."

So the next day hopped in a car and drove to Washington, D.C. They pulled up in front of the White House and Larry went to the guard at the gate and said, "Please tell the President that Larry is here to see him." Moments later, the front door of the White House opened up and there was Obama, a big smile on his face, welcoming Larry, putting his arm around him, and along with Jim, they went inside and watched the game on television and had a great time together.

A few days later, Jim ran into Larry and wondered if he would like to go to a movie with him. Jim confessed that he was a big Brad Pitt fan and was anxious to see his latest work. Larry said, "Yeah, sure I'd love to go, it will give me something to talk to Brad about the next time I see him." Jim replied, "O come on Larry, don't tell me you know Brad Pitt too, that's just unbelievable." Well, the next time Brad was in New York, Larry called up Jim and the three of

them all went out for coffee together. Brad Pitt greeted Larry with a big smile and a hug. During the course of their conversation. Brad Pitt mentioned that he was on his way to Rome to shoot his next movie. Larry responded by saying that maybe he would see Brad there as he was on his way in a couple of weeks to visit with Francis.”

When Larry said this, Jim did a double take, he looked at Larry and said, “O come one Larry, Francis? Do you mean the Pope? I find that hard to believe.”

Well, seeing that Jim had some vacation coming to him and a little extra money in the bank, he bought a ticket and accompanied Larry on his trip to Rome. They arrived at the airport and took a cab to St. Peters Square. Larry left Jim with the big crowd in the square and said that he would see him again in a few moments. A little while after that, Pope Francis appeared on the balcony and started blessing people. And who should be up there beside him but...you guessed it, Larry!

Jim was utterly amazed! In disbelief he nudged a fellow standing next to him in the crowd, pointed to the balcony, and said, "Look!"

The guy shaded his eyes with his palm, peered up at the balcony, turned back to Jim, and said, "Who's that guy in the hat up there standing next to Larry?"

Oh, to be so special! To find oneself in such special places with such people. You know, we shouldn't underestimate this desire we all have to be special. We live in a culture that expects and celebrates it!

Psychologists have noted that people can underestimate their desire to feel special. They are uncomfortable with acknowledging a desire to be special. Many people not only feel uncomfortable with this desire, but will go to great lengths to deny their desire for specialness as if it were a sign of weakness -a flaw in their personality. They will come across as needy. As a result, there is a tendency to instead act-out this desire to be special rather than simply acknowledge it. Sometimes it can be acted out in ways that adversely affect relationships. This happens when individuals who will often request that plans get changed to suit them or schedules get adjusted to accommodate their special needs with little or no consideration for others.

We can all find ourselves in position of hoping for special treatment. If you get pulled over by the police for a traffic violation we hope that the officer will let us off with a warning because of our “special circumstances.” We want the airline to make an exception for us when we are late for a plane or when our luggage is a bit too large for a carry-on. It’s not that we’re bad people, we just want to receive that extra bit of attention to let us know that we matter in this very impersonal world; we want to be seen as a person, to be validated as unique.

Now, the issue isn’t whether it is good or bad to want to be treated specially; rather, it is whether we can distinguish between being special and being treated specially. In other words, do we know that we are special without being given special treatment?

You know recently I was reading an article that focused on how unhappy many people find themselves in North American and Western societies and how a lot of this unhappiness is a byproduct of our search for something special. The author noted how we look to far off lands and places where people seem to have so little...that somehow these people appear happier than those of us who have so much. What the author of the article was suggesting that because of our need to acquire, attain and be upwardly mobile...in our quest to raise our status and be more special...we actually find ourselves consumed by greater levels of stress and anxiety. We believe that somehow if we do not acquire, or do not attain, or cannot sustain success, then we resign ourselves to believing that we’re not that special after all. The author points out, and rightly so I believe, that we actually cheapen our value as human beings when we do this. We can fail to see just how special we are...or we get so caught up in our need for special treatment, we fail to see that we and the ones around us are already special.

That’s why I love how in John’s gospel, Jesus’ first sign of his special nature, occurs at a wedding feast in Cana. I mentioned earlier how the places in the upper Galilee like the town of Nazareth weren’t all that special. If Nazareth was a small village, Cana was even more insignificant. These days Cana still exists and sits adjacent to Nazareth. Some of us have visited there. In fact, you can even buy a bottle of Cana wedding wine. Although at \$6 a bottle or 3 for \$15... I don’t imagine it’s all that special! I am sure it is nothing like the wine that was produced at the wedding feast described in John’s Gospel. Regardless, it is in Cana, when the glory of

Christ is first revealed. There he provided a special vintage for a special occasion and his grace was shared with all who were there that day.

It should come as no surprise that Jesus and his disciples were invited to the wedding. In such a small town, everyone would have known everybody, chances are they were related somehow. Even Jesus' mother is in attendance.

Weddings, then as now were special occasions. Fathers would store away wine for years in preparation of a wedding feast for a daughter. Thus when the wine runs out in the story...if this had become known amongst all the guests, it would have been a grave social embarrassment. The party would have stopped and everyone would have gone home. It wouldn't have been the way a young couple would have wanted to start off their life together. It would have turned that special occasion into something less than special.

Yet the Mother of Jesus, well aware, like most mothers of just how special their children are, goes to Jesus and asks him to do something. Mary knew her son it seems better than he knew himself. She knew he could do something to improve the situation, yet Jesus seems reluctant to share his special nature. But, when faced with the needs of others, Jesus does not keep to himself, he provides. With the help of the servants who fetched the over 100 or so gallons of water needed to fill the jars, enough wine is supplied to keep the party going for everyone. And most of them didn't have a clue of what had just taken place.

This event was important to the disciples. The text notes it "revealed his glory" that "his disciples believed in him." Perhaps it would be more appropriate to say that they believed they were a part of something special...or that by being associated with Jesus they were on the rise. They may have been wondering what they were going to get out of it all.

However, as I read this story as a story of God's grace, I am reminded not only of the disciples need to be special, but all of the other people at the wedding. Consider them, we do not know their names...not even the names of the bride and groom. But what we do know is that Jesus considered all of them special enough to be the recipients of his grace that day...even if they were not aware of it. This was the true glory of Jesus that was revealed that day.

In Jesus, we see the activity of a God who we might consider to be downwardly mobile. A God who enters into this world and into the mundane not to reserve some special status for

himself...but in order that he might share it with others...even at a no name wedding in nowhere Cana. This is something his disciples had yet to appreciate as they began that three year journey with Jesus as he made his way to the cross. The disciples still had to come to appreciate in their own lives what they saw Jesus do at the wedding feast that day in Cana. They had to learn how to let go of their need to attain something special...in order that they might instead be something special.

It's along the lines of what the apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians, when he said, "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness." You see, this is what makes Jesus special, is his ability to let go of the need to attain, to search for something special or acquire something special...or demand special treatment. He just decided he was going to be someone special...for others.

You know, someone who offers a wonderful testimony as to what this shift can mean not only in the Christian life but in the world is Henri Nouwen. You may have heard of Nouwen, who for many years in his life had established himself as a specialist in pastoral theology, Christian spirituality and pastoral care. He held positions and had taught at Notre Dame, Yale Divinity school and Harvard and had written many books.

Nouwen confessed that the day came in his life when he felt burnt out. He could no longer maintain the busy schedule and the lifestyle that many associated with being so special. Turning to God in prayer, Nouwen heard the answer to leave academic life and enter L'Arche community in Richmond Hill, Ontario. For those of you who do not know, L'Arche is a Christian community for people with mental handicaps. "Go live among the poor in Spirit and they will heal you," is what Nouwen heard in God's reply to his prayer. It was the directive to become downwardly mobile, to become a servant.

In this move away from the high-paced life of chasing after this and that, where he was once surrounded by people with weighty credentials and special status...after spending time surrounded by ones who lacked the intellect, the status and the standing that Nouwen had enjoyed being around most of his life, Nouwen said, "Here I am completely vulnerable, open to

receive and give love regardless of any accomplishments.” I love those words, “Here I am completely vulnerable, open to give and receive love regardless of any accomplishments.”

Those words are powerful words, and a wonderful confession. Saying them, I believe would be a great way to start any day. “Here I am completely vulnerable, open to give and receive love regardless of any accomplishment.”

Those words revealed in Nouwen a transformed spirituality a new way of living. It is the miracle of Christ’s presence in him. He had been freed to become something even more special. It’s what we become when we forgo the special treatment and behold the special presence of the sacred in those around us. For this is what it means to be a disciple...to be a follower of the way of Christ.

Amen.