

Come and See—What?

Second Sunday of Epiphany, 1/17/21

John 1:43-51

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 about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.’ Nathanael said to him, ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ Philip said to him, ‘Come and see.’ When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, ‘Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!’ Nathanael asked him, ‘Where did you come to know me?’ Jesus answered, ‘I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.’ Nathanael replied, ‘Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!’ Jesus answered, ‘Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.’ And he said to him, ‘Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.’

Nathanael is deeply skeptical. When Philip runs up to him and breathlessly proclaims, “We have found him, the messiah, the one that we have been looking for centuries. It’s Jesus, son of Joseph, from Nazareth,” Nathanael dismissively retorts, “Can anything good come out of that backwater burg?” Philip replies with the words which have become the church’s template for how to do effective evangelism for two millennia, “Come and See.”

He does not argue with him. He does not engage in debate. He does not berate him for his obvious narrow-mindedness. He just invites him to check it out for himself and then form his own opinion about Jesus. Books on evangelism would fill several libraries. Many fortunes have been made by people offering sure fire programs to grow your church—but nobody has come up with a more effective strategy than committed Christians offering a simple invitation: Come and See.

Yet getting people to “come and see” seems particularly challenging these days. In *Days of Awe and Wonder*, Marianne Borg observes that we are living in a religious “terrain which is both trampled and uncharted.” It is trampled in the sense that it is hard for people to believe that the path we commend can offer anything new. Just as a busy hiking trail is usually devoid of striking wildflowers because so many have walked it, it is hard to convince people that the way of discipleship can offer many surprises. They are pretty sure they already know about Jesus. Maybe they are not church regulars, but they have certainly heard the outline of the Christian story; it permeates news and culture. They

have heard the language of sin and getting saved. They have a perception of the wares the churches is peddling and suspect they are as antiquated as an 8-track tape player. More than that, some feel they have been trampled by a church that is heavy on guilt and lacking in intellectual curiosity. “What’s to see?” they ask. “Been there, done that, got the T-shirt—it wasn’t all that great.”

Paradoxically, this overfamiliarity and disillusionment with the language and institutions of religion make many feel disoriented and confused. They may have decided that the old map does not work anymore, but they still have to find a way to journey through life—now without some of the landmarks which guided previous generations. The challenge we face as Christians is convincing a skeptical world that there is a path in the wilderness which is more than personal preference, a way worthy of commitment. So what exactly is it we are asking people to come and see?

Certainly we want people to come and see our communities of faith. Evangelism is way more than inviting people to experience worship and the programs of our congregations, but it is not less. People do not magically learn about the Christian faith; they have to be given an invitation at a specific time and place.

I think we sometimes underestimate what we have to offer and are thus shy about offering it. Yet when the church is really the church it is an amazing community. It is the place where rich and poor, liberal and conservative, brilliant and simple, transcend their differences in a common quest to honor God. There are few institutions which hold at their core that all persons are to be valued and welcomed without judgment. People in our cutthroat culture are hungry for a place where they can be loved and accepted just as they are.

That assumes, of course, that our congregation is that kind of place. Our challenge is to be the church which our Lord calls us to be, to find a way to break through the noise of daily life and speak a word people long to hear, a word which makes an impression.

In the mid 1800s a church on the Baltimore harbor proclaimed, “All are welcome, every pew free.” This was a radical statement in a time of racial segregation and pew taxes, when people had to pay for the best seats. We might ask what radical word we could speak in our time which would help people understand that our congregation is serious about extending the welcome of Christ and living it in all we do.

Doing that means we are also inviting others to come and see our lives. If there is one thing which makes most people reluctant to commend their faith to others, I suspect, it is the fear that others will not find God’s action in their lives very compelling. We are reluctant to offer ourselves as exhibit A of what a Christian is. We are afraid we will be seen as a lousy cook who insists on sharing his recipe.

Yet nobody says you have to be perfect—or even terribly good—to share God’s love. Quite the contrary, what we offer is not our finished success but our experience of ongoing growth and discovery. What we invite others to come and see is not our triumph, but how, in the midst of our struggle, we have found one who still loves us with all our flaws. We offer ourselves as people who are on a journey which seems to be leading to fulfillment—and would welcome others to travel with us.

So yes, we invite people to come and see our community and our lives, but finally it is Jesus that we want them to come and see. People in the Orthodox tradition who write icons (that is the preferred term, rather than “paint”) will tell you that the goal in creating an icon is not to create a distinctive work of art which grabs the viewer’s attention, such as Rembrandt or Da Vinci might create. Rather, the writer tries to create something which allows the viewer to see through the icon to encounter the mystery of God in contemplation. It is an encounter with God, not appreciation of the art which is the focus.

In like manner our goal is finally to get out of the way and let people encounter God’s love in Christ for themselves. Our worship, our church’s programs, our lives are the means by which people are introduced to Jesus. But then we have to trust that the Holy Spirit will move them to take Jesus seriously and consider his claims and promises.

I can not make you like Cajun food; but I can make gumbo as tasty as I know how and let you decide if you’d like to explore étouffée or jambalaya. In the same manner, we can not compel people to follow the way of Jesus, but we can show them what it looks like in our lives and community and invite them to try it for themselves.

An adage often heard in education circles is “Don’t just tell me, show me.” We can be pretty sure that the people walking a religious terrain which is both trampled and uncharted are saying the same thing to us. “Please show me one who can bring excitement to life and hope when it seems desperate. Please show me in your life and community where I can find direction when I feel at sea.” We do not have to have it all worked out; we do not have to have all the answers. We just have to care enough to offer an invitation, “Come and See.”