

“The spiritual art of getting out of the way”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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John 1:43-51

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Two men are sitting at a bus stop, waiting for their morning commute to work. One of them looks over and notices that, while the other man has all the trappings of business—dress pants, shiny shoes, a briefcase—he’s wearing an old, worn, oversized T-shirt. Struck by the odd pairing, he looks closer and reads the writing on the shirt. It says, in bold capital letters, “LET’S TALK ABOUT JESUS!”

The next day, he sees the same man, with the same T-shirt. In fact, every weekday for six weeks, he sees the same man, with the same Jesus shirt. Finally his curiosity gets the better of him; he inches closer to the man at the bus stop, and asks him, “So you’ve got to tell me about your shirt. You must have incredible faith to wear it every day.” The other man looks at him for a moment, then breaks into a big smile, saying with a chuckle, “Oh this? This is my magic shirt. Any time I wear it on the bus, it guarantees I’ll have an entire seat to myself.”

In our text today, Nathanael wasn’t too keen on hearing about Jesus either. But that wasn’t going to stop Philip. No, sir. Jesus had called him by name. No one had ever wanted Philip before. No one had ever noticed him, cared about him. And now, the Messiah had chosen him. For the first time in his life, Philip felt like he had a purpose, like he mattered, like someone truly saw and loved him. So of course, he wanted to share that good news, that feeling, that faith. He found his friend Nathanael, grabbed him by the shoulder, and gushed, “We’ve found him! Oh boy, we have found the one Moses and the prophets promised! The one who will save us all. His name is Jesus. He’s the son of Joseph. And he comes from Nazareth.”

And Nathanael... laughed in his face: “Nazareth? You can’t be serious! Nothing good comes out of Nazareth! Certainly not a Messiah! Get your head checked.”

I imagine this was a very lonely moment for Philip. He had been so excited. He had thought surely his passion, his testimony, his friendship, would be enough to convince Nathanael. But it wasn’t. Nathanael didn’t believe. And there was nothing Philip could say to convince him otherwise.

I think we’re a lot like Philip. We each have experienced some morsel of truth. And we want to tell the world. We want to convince them that church is still relevant, that God loves them, that we’re called to live for more than ourselves, called to serve and cry justice. We want tell them about forgiveness and salvation. We want to convince them that racism is wrong, and that women’s bodies aren’t objects, and that the earth is worth saving. But no matter how hard we try, no matter the eloquence or wisdom of our words, they don’t listen. They don’t care. They don’t believe.

It's frustrating. And it's really lonely—seeing a truth that's invisible to so many others.

What's interesting is that Philip doesn't give up. He doesn't yell. He doesn't condemn Nathanael to hell. He doesn't walk away, feeling smug and self-righteous. Instead, he looks Nathanael in the eye and says, "Come and see for yourself."

What an odd response. Not, I'm sure, what Nathanael was expecting. No argument. No plea. Just: "come and see for yourself."

So, Nathanael does. He meets this alleged Messiah. I'm sure he's prepared for all manner of sermons and prognostications. Instead, he hears Jesus talking about *him*. Talking about him as if he knows Nathanael, as if he's always known Nathanael. Jesus looks into his heart and names what he sees there, and suddenly, Nathanael intuits what Philip had known all along. He proclaims Jesus the Son of God, the King of Israel. He risks his life in calling Jesus king; other kings aren't going to like that. But Nathanael risks anyway, because now he believes.

At first, of the two, it was only Philip who had directly experienced Jesus. He had seen Jesus; had talked with him. Nathanael, on the other hand, had only heard about Jesus secondhand, through Philip. As such, he was skeptical, resistant. It's not until he too has a direct encounter with Jesus that Nathanael is able to believe.

Jesus goes on to promise Nathanael visions. He will see heaven open and see the power and gospel of Christ. He will experience God for himself.

Later, concerned for what will happen when he departs, concerned for people having to rely on secondhand reports, Jesus will promise the Holy Spirit, that we would always have a direct experience of God.

This tells us two things: one, the importance of knowing God directly. In the end, Philip doesn't convert Nathanael. Jesus does. But it also tells us that Philip still had a role to play. Philip prepared the way by inviting Nathanael to "come and see." Most importantly, he got out of the way and allowed Christ to do his work. You'll note that once Nathanael encounters Jesus, Philip disappears from the story. He never tries to claim credit or mediate the experience. He just backs off, and lets God and Nathanael take it from there.

In a particularly delightful scene in Yann Martel's book *Beatrice and Virgil*, Virgil attempts to explain to Beatrice what a pear is. Beatrice has never experienced a pear. She's never seen one, never tasted one. Over the course of five pages, Virgil tries everything he can to help Beatrice understand a pear. By the end, he gives up with a shrug, saying, "A pear tastes like, it tastes like... I don't know. I can't put it into words. A pear tastes like itself."

Imagine it: trying to explain a pear to someone who has never seen or tasted a pear. It'd probably be better to give them a pear. Let them taste it for themselves.

That's what Philip does. If it's so hard to describe a pear, how much harder must it be to tell someone about God? Philip guesses, correctly, that it's much better just to let that person meet God themselves—taste the pear.

We're not supposed to tell people about the kingdom of God; we're supposed to invite them in. Let them sit at the table and eat till they are full.

I could tell a man about nature, but better, I think, to bring a man into a forest, where the sun dapples his face, and the birds sing to him, and his feet sink in the mud, and nature speaks to this man directly.

So too with God. And justice. And truth. And love. We do not teach. We invite.

If that bothers you, if you insist on being the mediator, the arbiter of truth, ask yourself: who are you trying to make others see? Jesus or yourself?

Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his 1838 address to the graduates of Harvard Divinity School, said, "Whilst the doors of the temple stand open, night and day, before every [human], and the oracles of this truth cease never, it is guarded by one stern condition; this, namely, it is an intuition. It cannot be received at secondhand. Truly speaking, it is not an instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul."

As souls of provocations, as the ones who say "come and see," we are, in the words of Emerson, "bard[s] of the Holy Ghost [...who] acquaint [humanity] at first hand with Deity."

As disciples, we are in the business of creating space for people to have direct encounters with Christ—and with Christ's radically inclusive kingdom. Instead of arguing the merits of Christianity, why not invite someone to serve alongside you at the soup kitchen, or to bring communion to a shut in, or to worship with you in prison? We know Jesus will meet them there, because he met us there.

All we have to do is provide the opportunity. Provide the contemplative hikes, Bible studies, mission projects, worship, fellowship, and activism. And then? Get out of the way and allow God to work.

Tomorrow is a day when we remember Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement. Tomorrow is a day when we remember a movement that invited a nation to come and see a dream of a beloved community that was not bound by race or class. A movement that invited us to come and see the dignity and power of a people crying out for freedom; to come and see the flame still burning within them; to come and see the true animal, the beast of white supremacy; to come and see Jesus Christ being chased by dogs, hosed and gassed, walking through spit and slur, beaten and bloody and yet still marching, still singing, still heading to kingdom come, to a stone rolled away. It wasn't enough to hear theories of justice or equality. It wasn't enough to tell people about what was happening. They had to see it for themselves. They had to be there and feel it.

And there, among thousands of tired feet pounding the pavement, among dreams shouted from the mountaintop and little, mighty girls walking to school, there a nation met God.

Come and see. Such simple words to mark the beginning of a journey to truth. To justice. To love. To God. **Amen.**