

Come and See

A sermon on John 1:35-51

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight oh Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.*

Feet are honest. At least that is what a lot of body language experts will tell you. The further an extremity is from the brain, the less consciously we control it. If a person is talking with you but wanting to be elsewhere, their dominant foot will point to an exit or toward wherever they'd rather escape to. If their feet are pointed at you it means their engaged in the conversation. So often without realizing it, our bodies give such clues as to our intent.

I was thinking about this in connection
with one of the craft projects we sent out to the Sunday School kids
for a Fishers of Men lesson, a similar theme to today's gospel lesson calling of disciples -
a game in which magnetized fish are caught
with steel washers tied to the end of miniature fishing rods.
There are twelve of these fish standing for the twelve disciples.
“wait - weren't the disciples the ones doing the fishing?”
I'm sure you were thinking that.

The thing that preparing these fishing craft kits made me remember is that
this is exactly how the disciples point us towards Christ.
The disciples aren't necessarily fish who just talk with other fish saying
“there's a steel washer over yonder, it's the Messiah and you should go check it
out.”

No, if these fish are any indication,
these disciples point with their whole bodies and whole being.
When we talk about the twelve disciples,
we'd do well to remember that it isn't actually about them.
It's about God.

That's not to say that they aren't important people,

Come and See

but that they are so important because they do this pointing thing,
keeping themselves oriented towards Christ.

In the reading from John's gospel this morning
we hear that two disciples of John the Baptist
(Andrew and we presume John - the gospel-writer)
are following Jesus down the road,
having been told he is the Lamb of God.

As God does when someone starts seeking Him,
even if by the mere pointing of a foot, Christ turns to these two.
He then gives them the chance to articulate what they are seeking.

If you met Jesus on the road like that I wonder what you would ask.
For my own part, I don't know that I would go with a "where are you staying?"
It might seem to lack a bit of depth,
couldn't they have gone for a "what is the meaning of life"
"why do bad things happen to good people" or anything else,
but they go with something that is even more profound.
"Where are you staying" implies "this might take awhile"
"we want to be able to find you again"
"we want to spend time with you"

Sometimes I wonder how much even I want that deeper relationship that takes regular
contact.

It can be easier to keep things superficial.

It is easy to imagine prayer as merely the transfer of our wish lists to God.

Go to Him when you need something and don't bug him the rest of the time.

But Christ is not an acquaintance to be known merely in passing.

Andrew and John at least are after something more.

One of my favorite saints is a 7th century monk called Isaac the Syrian.

He writes that "the highest form of prayer is to stand silently in awe before God."

Doing so places priority on cultivating a relationship with God,

Come and See

to say “I don’t really have anything to say, I just want to spend time in Your Holy presence.”

Jesus’ reply to Andrew and John’s “where are you staying” query is to “Come, and you will see.”

Many translations follow the Latin for some reason
and render that as two commands: come and see,
I don’t know why the Latin version went with imperatives,
in the Greek it is clear that “you will see”
is the natural result of accepting that invitation to come.
But I’m not going to make this about verb parsing.

Whichever way you take it, Jesus does not give them information,
i.e. the address of a geographical location,
but instead the invitation come and see.
You see, our faith is not so much about information and explanation
as it is and experience and encounter with the divine.

We see the same thing in Philip’s invitation to Nathanael to come and see.
He doesn’t try to explain how it might be that
“anything good could come from Nazareth”
in response to the doubts Nathaniel raised.
Instead he asks him to come and see for himself.

I’ve mentioned this to this congregation before,
but probably the best explanation I’ve ever heard for
why anyone would want to study theology,
enter the ministry or otherwise devote their lives to God is that
“there’s just something about God.”
And that seems to be the case a couple of millennia ago as much as it is today.

This encounter and relationship the disciples formed with Christ
led to some pretty serious conclusions.
We have found the Messiah. Andrew tells his brother Simon Peter.

Come and See

“Him of whom Moses in the Law and the prophets wrote” “We found Him.”

And these disciples aren't portrayed as they are in the other gospels as unlettered fishermen. Some were disciples of John the Baptist, already seeking God.

Nathanael also is often understood as the scholarly sort.

There's the suggestion that his objection came from his knowledge of the scriptures that would point to the Messiah being from Bethlehem and not Nazareth.

But even Nathanael with his doubts finds himself exclaiming

“Rabbi, You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”

As John tells it, Jesus is quite compellingly the Christ to those who have been looking for Him.

Let's take a further look at Nathanael's first encounter with Jesus,
which it seems was not Jesus' first encounter with Nathanael.

Jesus sees him while Nathanael is just coming towards Him, and He says a curious thing:

Behold, an Israelite in whom is no deceit.

It might seem cocky of Nathanael to accept such praise,
though we DO not see any deceit in him. Indeed, Nathanael did rightly in coming and seeing for himself despite his doubts, more impressively, despite even his KNOWLEDGE.

Remember Nathanael's comment to Philip: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

Jesus here does not explain that he was actually born in Bethlehem,
or how it could be that “Him of whom Moses and the Prophets wrote”
could come from such a place as Nazareth.

Instead Jesus reminds him about the Patriarch “Israel” that is Jacob

- in whom there was deceit aplenty! Jacob was a trickster,
gaining his brothers birthright and blessing through means of questionable morality.

But from deceitful Israel, here was a descendent who lacked that particular character flaw. Essentially there is here a playful reminder that good can come from unlikely places.

Whether Nathanael caught that or not,

he replies in such a way that shows that he feels RECOGNIZED, KNOWN,
perhaps exposed by this Jesus guy from Nazareth.

Come and See

“From where do You know me?” He asks.

Jesus answers again, not with an explanation of his knowledge,
but with a demonstration of it - “I saw you under the fig tree”

The fig tree could be a literal fig tree,

there are suggestions that the studious would spend time under such trees.

But being in John’s gospel, there’s probably more layers of meaning.

Symbolically, fig trees are reminiscent of the fig leaves

with which Adam and Eve had covered themselves with in the Garden

- the fig leaves that Adam and Eve hoped

would conceal them and their shame from God.

No fig leaf, or anything else that can do this.

whether because he had been sitting in the shade of that species of tree

or because he liked symbolic wordplay,

it was the case that he had been known in a way he hadn’t expected.

He had been known through a time when he thought he was alone.

God has a relationship with us, whether or not we pay Him much mind.

He sees us through the fig leaves.

And yet he turns to those who turn to Him,

and gives the invitation to come along and the promise that we will see,
and maybe even exclaim “We have found the Messiah.”

“We have found Truth and Light and Life.”

*Now to the One
who by the power at work within us
is able to do far more abundantly
than all we can ask or imagine,
to God be glory in the church
and in Christ Jesus
to all generations, forever and ever.
Amen.*