

Come and See

Sermon Preached by
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at
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Scriptures:

Luke 4:14-21, 38-41; 5:1-11

John 1:29-50

Your summer preaching theme—“Can organized religion adapt to change?”—stirred up a rather vivid flashback for me—of my arrival on the Williams College campus to begin working as Chaplain thirteen years ago this very week.

The campus was almost deserted that week, and I'd been warned that most of the people I'd find most helpful in getting to know the place wouldn't get back until the dog days of summer were well along. Toward the end of that rather desolate first week, one generous new friend in the college administration invited me over for supper and what she described as a chance to meet a few good people she was sure I'd find it helpful to know. By that time I felt about as hungry for introductions as I've ever been for food. Things I'd heard about her hospitality and superb cooking burnished the eagerness with which I looked forward to that evening. “It'll be very informal,” she said. At last, I thought: a way in to the new community.

When I pulled up in front of her house on the appointed evening, both sides of the quiet street were solidly packed with parked cars, and the house was ablaze with sound and light. Inside, of course, I recognized almost no one. Finally I spotted my friend on the far side of several dense knots of conversation. When I had threaded my way into the room to greet her, she scooped me up and maneuvered me to a sofa. “Just sit,” she said; “I'll bring you a plate” – and then, just before she disappeared, with her hand on the shoulder of a distinguished-looking bearded man beside whom I was now sitting, “You need to meet Bert. He's one of our *very best people*,” she said, her eyes sparkling. “Bert, this is our *new chaplain*. I'll be right back.”

Channeling as much as I could of her bright energy, I reached for the low-hanging conversational fruit: “So what keeps you busy here?”

“I teach statistics,” Bert said.

The pause that followed lasted just long enough for a bit of desperation to set in under the murmuring roar of the roomful of people. “Statistics,” I finally said, astutely.

“That’s right,” Bert said, looking down at his plate. Another pause. Then he made eye contact again and said pleasantly, and as deliberately as seemed possible, “I ... *hate* ... organized religion.”

Every now and then I get a new idea of a reply I might have made in that moment: “I ... *hate* ... numbers,” maybe—or, “Thank you for moving our relationship so quickly to this level of intimacy by sharing this important piece of your spiritual journey”—or, “So, you’re a Unitarian?”

But at the time, his turn of the phrase “organized religion” seemed to have some of the same conversation-stopping properties as, I gather, it has for those who laid the groundwork for a series of sermons about it from this pulpit this summer. These days, “organized religion” sounds a little like a conspiracy to constrain people’s intellectual freedom—or to limit the unbridled exploration and expression of their spirituality—or to moor them to a set of tired old traditions that have needed freshening for the past two or three generations. Assumptions like these are my daily bread—unfortunately; so many of the students I work with just assume that there’d be no reason to go to a religious service (presumably an “organized” one) because they’d think they’d heard it all before—probably in a scolding tone of voice from a parent or some screeching contemporary moralizer. A friend of mine, a pastor, likes to wonder out loud, “Who turned my beautiful religion into a set of rules about sex?”

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If your preaching theme stirred a memory for me of first things in my current ministry, it then sent me back to thinking about first things in a more original sense: first things in the threadbare, rag-tag, history-changing movement that grew up around Jesus of Nazareth when it all got started in the first place. How did this religion of ours look when it first got “organized”? Nowadays maybe it’s true that there are lots of people who’d say that they wouldn’t be caught dead near anything that could be described as “religious”. But there was a time when people were willing to risk precisely that in order to be counted in as part of this movement. What happened to that energy?

Like many movements, the precise origins of the one that gathered around Jesus are a little hard to trace. Just as the gospels disagree about the circumstances of his birth, so they start the story of his relationship to his disciples in different places. And in this instance I’m going to invite us to read the disparate gospel stories of the call of the disciples superimposed on each other like a kind of multiple-exposure photograph—the way we read Luke’s Christmas story (the one with the shepherds and the angels) and Matthew’s Christmas story (the one with Herod and the wise men) and see the single, unified image of the crèche. Most of us remember Jesus walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee as the fishermen are untangling their nets—beguiling them, somehow, to leave their former life behind with only the invitation, “Follow me.” Matthew (4:18) and Mark (1:16) remember it in that simple, straightforward way. This morning we read Luke’s version because he adds a few details that make a good deal more narrative sense: by the time Jesus strolls along the beach he has preached an audacious sermon proclaiming freedom for the oppressed, recovery of sight for the blind, and the inauguration of “the year of God’s favor” (4:18-19)—and then followed it up with a whole series of healings that more or less set the landscape abuzz. Only then does he take his seaside stroll—so that when he says those apparently irresistible words, “Follow me,” there is someplace to follow him *to*—something to follow him *about*.

Against that narrative backdrop, the inaugural words of the movement as the gospel of John remembers them are the most disarming, most irresistible of all.

John the Baptist has already had an encounter with Jesus that has persuaded him of the integrity and importance of Jesus' mission. Now John is standing with several others when Jesus approaches—and John says, in effect, “There’s the man I was telling you about.” When Jesus turns and notes their interest he says, simply—his very first words in the Gospel of John (in which he speaks more words than any of the other three): “*What are you looking for?*” What a kind, attentive, pastoral question—one that would stand on its own legs today as a sensitive and appropriate inquiry even in this highly skeptical, religiously insecure age. What do you hunger for? What are you wanting, needing, yearning for? Not, “Do you believe?” or, “Are you interested in signing this membership pledge?” or, “Does your view on several key issues fit the one described here in our recently-published pamphlet?” Just, *What are you looking for?* They respond, “Rabbi” (which is already, when you think about it, a good part of the substance of their answer: We are looking for someone to teach us—we are looking for something worth learning)—“Rabbi,” they say, “where are you staying?” Rabbi, can we go where you’re going? And then, his immortal words—an answer for all seasons: *Come and see.*

To hear those disciple-gathering stories together—the stories of his audacious proclamation of good news for the lost, his healing of the infirm, his inclusive question to the curious and his generous invitation to one and all—is to hear the organizing principle of our movement: come and see what’s going on, and start thinking about what part of this story is about you. Come and see what difference this good news makes. Come and see how, organized or unorganized, the love of God is at work in the world: proclaiming justice, working healing, making hope.

When you get right down to it, as a matter of origins, it never got too much more “organized” than that. Oh, yes, toward the end he seems to have appointed one of them to keep an eye on the movement through the next generation—though by the end of the first century Peter and Paul and John and James had a lot of untangling of their nets to do just to figure out where it would go next. But over and over again, while he had an earthly voice to say it, what he said was, *Come and see.* Come and see what happens when a traveler gets beaten up and left for dead beside the side of the road—come and see what happens. Come and see what difference it makes when a father who has every reason to be counting only his young son’s foolish and selfish mistakes instead counts the son’s infinite worth, and welcomes him home. Come and see what happens when, while breaking bread together, we consciously remember his insistence that we would meet him again in that small act of hospitality, and remember his confidence that our being as brim-full of his love as the cup was in his hand would cause us eventually to spill it all out all over the poor hungry, waiting world—to spill it out for all the ones to whom he puts the question, over and over again down the generations, “What are you looking for?”

In the gospel of John you can watch those words, “Come and see,” echo on like a ripple in a pond—first to Andrew, then through him to Peter, then to Phillip and through him to

Nathanael, and on and on down to Bob, eventually, and Barbara, and then Alexandra, and me, and you. Mother Teresa spoke them as a kind of mantra of welcome to anyone who ever asked how they could help with her work among the dying in Calcutta: “Come and see,” she would say, with her eyes ablaze.

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I realize that I haven’t really answered the question you asked. Can organized religion adapt to change? It’s easy (and, also, true) just to say, “I don’t know.” Almost certainly there’s some truth to those public perceptions of religious institutions as reinforcers of ossified dogmas or anachronistic debate societies tearing each other apart over issues the culture has long since resolved. I think, though, that none of that is what brought you out through this stunning Sunday morning to this admittedly somewhat organized and, it must be said, visibly steeped religious place. Because, almost certainly too, there’s some truth to the church’s self-perception as a breath of fresh air for a sin-weary, selfish and materialistic society. We can go back and forth trading those images for a while.

But meanwhile...

Meanwhile, if we hear Jesus again asking—in his so timely and open way—*What are you looking for?*—and if we are honest in responding that we are looking for something to care about, something going on that’s making a difference, some piece of the truth that may set us free—then we shouldn’t be surprised to hear what he says next. *Come and see!* Come and see what’s going on. Come and see what happens when a roomful of people care about an elderly friend whose infirmity keeps her from being with them to sing the beloved old songs and follow along with the indelibly beautiful little ritual with the bread and the wine. Come and see what difference it makes when the hearts of those same people ache over the violence in Syria and Egypt—or over the violence in their own society. Come and see how it goes when they put their minds to the task of delivering the superb health care they’ve already invented to every citizen as a matter of simple justice and simple compassion. Come and see what happens when someone who has been named an outcast because of what color her skin is or whom he loves or what foolish and selfish mistakes they’ve made in the past is finally welcomed home by the arms of the church as a precious and beloved son or daughter. Come and see what happens when a little village in the hills gets together, week by week every summer down the years, to ponder the biggest questions with a whole symphony of different voices weighing in. Come and see what difference it makes in their lives.

What’s to hate?

Come and see what’s happening in all those places, where the work is still as alive and urgent and heartbreaking and beautiful as ever it was. And then let’s see what kind of a movement we can make out of it. Let’s see what kind of a movement it can make out of us.