

God's Invitation to Learn: The Church  
John 1:29-42  
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At the recent continuing education event I attended the keynote speaker, Tom Long, told about an entertaining night at the theater. A young actor named Tom Key was playing the part of Jesus in the play *Cotton Patch Gospel* and he was bringing the house down. The play, a fun-loving, bluegrass musical which depicts the ministry of Jesus as if it had occurred in the cotton fields and Baptist churches of rural south Georgia, was in its final performance run, and Key was feeling playful, even inventive with his lines. His enthusiasm was contagious and he clearly had the audience in the palm of his hand.

During the scene portraying the Sermon on the Mount, Key, as Jesus, suddenly turned from the actors on the stage toward the audience, pointed to the blank auditorium side wall, and said, "Look at the lilies in that field . . ." He stopped, like he had forgotten the next line, peeked around at the disciples, focused again on the audience and repeated, "Look at the lilies in the field . . ." Once more he stopped and seemed to be searching for the next words. The audience began to stir uneasily. His hand extended yet again to the blank wall, and this time he spoke the words very slowly, "Look . . . at . . . the . . . lilies . . . in . . . that . . . field . . ." Now he turned to the disciples, and as he shrugged his shoulders, said, "I can't get them to look." The audience broke forth in laughter as it dawned on them that he really wanted them to look. And, of course, when he gave one more try, "Look at the lilies in that field . . ." every head in the audience turned toward the side wall.

It's too bad the author of John's gospel was not present that night in the theater because it was his kind of show. Indeed he spends his entire gospel trying to get people to look, really look, at the life and ministry of Jesus

Christ. Says one commentator, “Light and darkness, vision and dimness are the stuff of John’s gospel.” Again and again, John points at Jesus and sounds the refrain, “Look – look – look!”

To be sure, the willingness to look and to see stands at the heart of today’s gospel lesson. John the Baptist is standing with two of his disciples when Jesus walks by. John points dramatically to Jesus and says, “Look, the Lamb of God!” Apparently moved by his words, the two disciples follow Jesus. When Jesus realizes that they are following him he asks, “What are you looking for?”

The pair answer Jesus, not with a statement of discipleship, but with a question. “Rabbi, where are you staying?” When you think about it, this is an odd response. Jesus asks them a question about discipleship; they counter with a question about his housing situation. Biblical scholars know, however, that this is a question not merely about lodging, but about the nature of Jesus himself. “Where are you staying?” means, in essence, “Who are you? Where is the ‘home,’ the center of your life?” It would be equally valid to translate the disciples’ response as, “At this point we don’t know whom we are following or where this path is leading. Can you tell us?”

Jesus then invites them to “come and see,” and it is only in the journeying and in the seeing that they begin to figure out the true dimensions of what is happening to them. Friends, I want to suggest today that that is at the heart of what brings us to Christ and his community of faith known as the church. This invitation is to come and see what God is doing in and through a community of believers known as the church. What we see are people growing in faith as they connect, learn, serve, and worship with one another.

The story goes on to tell us that one of these disciples was Andrew, the brother of a man named Simon. Andrew goes to his brother and tells him, “We have found the Christ,” and then Andrew brings Simon to Jesus.

Jesus takes one look at Simon and then makes this startling statement, “You are Simon. I’m changing your name. From now on, you will be called ‘Peter.’”

When we analyze it, this call to follow Christ, to be a part of his community, as mysterious as it first seems, is not far removed from the realities of life today. We see here people stumbling along, following a presence they do not yet understand, discovering only after the fact that the path has led to Christ and other followers. We see a portrait of a person being tugged along to Jesus by a brother, following more out of family loyalty than out of a sense of mystery, finding at the end of the path, and not at the beginning, that his name . . . and his life . . . have been transformed.

William Meuhl, the late professor at Yale Divinity School, put it this way, “The roads to Christian faith are as varied as the people who profess it.” For example, perhaps in this congregation today is the teenager with one eye on the pastor and the other focused on the “text” on her mobile phone. There is also the man who would rather be watching ESPN sports at home were it not for the fact that his wife has insisted that he accompany her to worship. There is the family here on some Sundays, only because their child wants to see her friend. There may be someone here who is simply church shopping.

“The point of all this,” says Tom Long, “is that the calling to follow Christ is a pathway which is marked ‘come and see.’ It is a pathway which is far more important because of where it leads,” that is, to Christ and his church, “than because of where it begins. It may begin... as a longing in the heart, a struggle in the soul, or a wondering in the mind.” It is a path which some people enter alone, which others enter by tagging along with friends or family, and down which yet others are dragged, at first reluctantly, by parents or teachers. No matter how we begin, we see as we travel that the pathway has been cleared for us by the Christ who goes before us, making of our many

beginnings a common journey. ‘Come and see,’ we are told, though the voice which calls us sometimes seems faint, filtered through the voices of ...[church] folks around us. And, for whatever reason, we do go, and, then, we do see.” Friends, this interim time in the life of our church gives us at least two unique opportunities to say to others, “Come and see.” One is the opening of our Great Room around Easter and the other is when your new Pastor comes. Each is an appropriate time to invite someone to our church. The invitation need not be theologically sophisticated or evangelically forward. It can be a simple “come and see.”

What we see is that, no matter how or when we started, we end up with a new name and identity, given to us by Christ. We are Christian, a part of Christ’s body, the church. What we see is that, no matter how we began our trip, we end the journey surrounded by a community of faith resting in the Christ who is all in all.

There is a woman in my home church who began her faith journey because she loved to sing. More accurately, she loved to sing in front of a crowd, and she basked in the lavish praise generated by her beautiful voice. My home church choir was far from show business, but it was as close to that as she could come, so she sang there. She had no interest in the rest of the worship, and she would often secretly read a paperback novel in the choir loft, waiting her chance to perform. I sang in the choir with her, so I know she did that.

Somehow, in time, the words of the solos and the anthems began to mean something to her. “The Hallelujah Chorus”, “And the Glory of the Lord” began to speak to her beyond the concerns of musical pitch. She was gradually becoming acquainted with the vocabulary of the faith, but more importantly, she was developing a relationship with the Christ to whom those words point.

Now, when she sings, she does so with a new name and identity. She is no longer just “performer.” Rather she is “witness” – a witness to Jesus Christ.

What does it take to make up a call to be a follower of Jesus Christ, a part of his community we call the church? One commentator suggests “every church ought to adopt the words ‘come and see’ as a slogan, and give to everyone who enters, for whatever reason, a [genuine] word of welcome.” Then, as church, we are called to serve the world in which we live. A number of us last night at the All Church Auction heard about some of the mission partners whom we serve as First Presbyterian Church. It is an impressive list of 37 service agencies.

But I began this sermon with a story by Tom Long I heard recently at a conference. So let me close with another story of his about a church about which he knew. The story appeared in one of his books some thirty years ago, long before the topic referenced was as strident as it is today.

In that church 30 years ago, the elders were “debating whether to join several other churches in their sponsorship of a local family health clinic. The clinic had been established for the families of migrant workers because the public health resources were inadequate and burdened with red tape. In the debate one of the officers spoke forcefully against supporting the clinic because, as he put it, ‘Most of the patients were undocumented, so we’d just be supporting illegal activity.’

“‘But they’re people,’ said another in the group, ‘and they need medical care.’ Back and forth went the discussion, with much passion but without resolution. Taking a vote would have been bitterly divisive, so the matter was tabled until the next meeting.

“On the following day, the pastor of the church called the elder who had spoken in opposition and [set up a lunch meeting]. During lunch the pastor asked him if he would be willing to take a few minutes on the way back to

work and visit the clinic in question. The man agreed, and the two of them found the waiting room at the clinic bustling with activity, full of [anxious] young mothers and squirming children. The pastor and the man sat down to observe for a few minutes.

“A nurse appeared at the door and called to one of the children, a little boy, about four years old, who marched bravely toward the nurse, already apprehensively rubbing his arm where he know he would soon receive a shot.

“A few minutes later the little boy reappeared at the door, now rubbing his pained arm in earnest, poking his lower lip forward, fighting the tears that were pushing out of his eyes. He searched the room for his mother, but she had taken another child to the restroom and was not to be found. The boy, finding what looked to him like a kind face, walked over to the man, crawled onto his lap, and rested his head on the man’s chest.

“First hesitantly, then willingly and lovingly, the man wrapped his hands around this fellow human being in need of care. When he did so, he was amazed by his own spontaneous compassion. Almost as amazed as were the other elders when he made the motion at the next meeting to sponsor the clinic.”

“Come and see,” said Jesus to the two disciples. And what did they see? . . . Well, you just have to be *here* and *there* where we as the church serve. Amen.

## SOURCES

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