

Come and See
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John 1:35 - 42

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The man rises to a height of six feet four inches. He weighs in at 260 pounds of solid muscle. His biceps are each the size of a canned ham. In 1991, he played on the University of Miami's championship football team. After a brief career in the Canadian Football League, the powerful athlete entered the business of his father and grandfather before him and became a professional wrestler. Nine times he won the undisputed championship of the World Wrestling Federation and became known as the star performer in the Nation of Domination. These days he plays the ultimate tough guy in action movies and comedy spoofs. His real name is Dwayne Johnson, but he is known primarily by his nickname, The Rock.

That's the image I get when Jesus puts his piercing gaze on Simon, sizes the man up and announces, "you've been known as Simon, the son of John, but after I get through with you, everyone is going to know you as "Cephas" in Aramaic or as "Peter" in Greek, or in English, "The Rock."

I suspect Peter, the fisherman, must have had a sturdy structure and muscular frame. I doubt that he was six foot four, that would have made him a giant in his race and in his era of history, but I imagine he was a big, strong guy. His temperament, however, was anything but rocklike.

In his 1986 hit, "Like a Rock", Bob Seger looked back on his younger self and sang, "My hands were steady, my eyes were clear and bright. My walk had purpose, my steps were quick and light. And I held firmly, to what I felt was right, like a rock."

Those words in no way describe Peter in his early days of discipleship. Before Pentecost, Peter steadily professed to be a courageous, loyal, unswerving, follower of Jesus. Whenever he faced any pressure or opposition to his faith, however, he crumbled like a stale cookie. Not exactly "like a rock."

Yet that is the nickname Jesus gave him, because Jesus could see beneath his almost buffoon-like exterior to the core strength of who Peter really was. Jesus knew that Peter was not the humpty-dumpty egg of man he so often appeared to be, but in fact, possessed the potential to be a granite-like leader under the guidance and grace of the Holy Spirit.

The Gospel of John tells us that one of the reasons Jesus was such a redemptive force in this world, is because he had the divine ability to see the true person inside the mess most people appeared to be. Nathaniel came across to most folks as a rather arrogant, young discontent. When Jesus looked upon him, however, he saw an honest man that would one day serve God with his unvarnished take on life. Her community saw the woman at the well as an outcast, but Jesus saw the beautiful soul of an evangelist. The people of Bethsaida saw a helpless, hopeless invalid lying by a sacred pool, but Jesus saw a man who could testify to the entire community of the healing power of God. The disciples saw a kid with a small lunch, Jesus saw a young man whose resources could feed a multitude. The Scribes saw an adulteress woman who should be executed, Jesus saw a woman who should be set free to live as a wondrous example of God's redeeming grace. The Pharisees saw a sinner, born blind, so they thought, as punishment for his or his parents' evil actions. Jesus saw a man whose faith would help him perceive miracles missed by the revered leaders of his religious community.

Throughout the fourth gospel, new believers invite friends, family and strangers to “come and see” Jesus. In every case, those issuing the invitation hope their loved ones and acquaintances will recognize that Jesus is the Messiah, the Anointed One who will save them from their sins. What the people they bring to Jesus often see first, however, is themselves in a new light. In a world where most folks pointed out their sins, flaws, shortcomings and mistakes, Jesus helped them see the true beauty and divine potential within.

On Wednesday night about 20 of us studied Zephaniah 3:17 where the prophet declares, “The Lord your God is with you and will take great delight in you and will quiet you with peaceful love.” I asked our group, “what does this verse mean to you?” and Carol Hurd immediately replied with words that have been ringing in my ears all week. She said, “it means God doesn’t despise me.”

So many folks assume that God despises them because the people in their lives pummel them with so much negativity. Folks at work, school, the neighborhood and in the home can be absolutely mute when it comes time to affirm our gifts, efforts, work or character, but jabber like magpies when it comes to our mistakes. That’s why we, like the two disciples in today’s text, crave to spend time with Jesus. For in Christ’s presence, we see ourselves in a new light, as beloved children of God.

When Andrew and the unnamed disciple saw themselves as Christ saw them, it was such a wonderful experience, they invited their brothers to come and see what Christ could do for them as well. The same thing happens to us. Because we have experienced the grace and love of Jesus, we naturally want those we care about to experience the same thing. As a result, we invite them to “come and see” what spending time with Jesus can do for them.

Our church is renewing our commitment to issuing this life-giving invitation to others. In the coming year, we will offer several programs and ministries that will help us invite people to come and see what Christ can do for them. The leadership of our church has worked hard in the budget process to reduce every administrative and personnel expense so that the money we all contribute can be directed toward inviting as many people as possible to come and see what the Lord can do for them. I urge you to support the 2011 budget with your tithes and offerings for as you do, you extend this wondrous invitation to those in our community who may not know that God loves them.

We want folks who have been despised by the world to enter into the presence of Jesus and begin to see themselves as Christ perceives them. The apostle Paul put Christ’s redemptive work in a very lofty way in Philippians 1:15 when he said that the Lord can transform us into blameless, innocent children of God who shine like stars in a crooked and perverse world.

Of course Paul, in the same passage, records a condition that must be met if we are to shine like stars in this perverse world. Immediately preceding his lofty vision of what we can become by God’s grace, Paul wrote, “Do all things without murmuring and arguing.” Sadly, what sometimes happens in church, is that we invite people to come and see Jesus, but when they get here, they are repelled by our lack of love for one another. Instead of hearing the music of affirmation and hope, they hear the all too common refrain of criticism, bickering, gossip and mean-spiritedness. Paul warned us that if we bring all the critical, elitist, judgmental spirit of the world into the household of God, we will not shine like stars in a perverse world, but instead make the darkness around us even darker. Jesus put it simply when he told his followers, “if the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness.”

In 1970, the Library of Congress designated William Stafford as America’s poet laureate. Seven years prior to that great honor, Stafford won the National Book Award for his collection of poetry entitled **Traveling Through the Dark**. In that book, Stafford, who was an active member of the Church of the Brethren, included his poem “Easter Morning.” The poem is about the danger of receiving Christians into your home. Stafford writes “Maybe someone

comes to the door and says, 'Repent' and you say, 'Come on in,' and its Jesus." The poet jubilantly declares that's when we come alive again and the best part of us cries out "I'm still here" and its true. "Except" Stafford continues, sometimes you let them in and they bring you more hell than you knew before. "What should you do?" he asks. Then he answers his own question, "I'd say always go to the door; yes, but keep the screen locked. Then while you hold the Bible in one hand, lean forward and say carefully, 'Jesus is that you?'"

I've never wanted to quit being a pastor because of too much work. Long days dealing with people in crisis is not what makes me reconsider my vocation. Difficult hours struggling with a sermon or Bible lesson doesn't make me want to hang up my preaching clothes. I can even handle the incessant administrative duties involved in this line of work. What makes me want to quit is when I or someone else in this beloved body of Christ takes on the same mean-spirited, argumentative, petty, small-minded, critical, antagonistic, reactionary attitude of the world around us and unleashes it into the environment of the church. When I do it, I find myself unworthy of the calling, when you all do it, I get so depressed, I want to quit.

I listen to you as well and know that you don't feel like quitting your service to this church because its hard. Like me, you're spirit is grieved when, in service to Christ, you run into the same critical, negative, mean-spirited attitude you find in the world.

The reason this ugly stuff bothers us so much is because it turns this constellation of stars into a black hole of darkness that brings everybody down. Rather than be the one place on earth, where folks can come and see what the love of God can do in their lives, we become just one more place that radiates negativity and crushing condemnation into the world.

And here's the most heartbreaking observation of all. When I act up or you lash out at me or one another, it is normally about nothing that really matters to Christ. I've given such actions careful reflection and decided that when I snap at someone, it is usually because in that moment, the issue I'm upset about becomes more important than the person with whom I'm speaking. On rare occasions, Jesus taught that an issue is so important that it takes precedence over one person's feelings. The stuff we generally criticize one another about, however, is seldom that kind of issue. Instead, we allow our egos, pride, fear and conceit to momentarily overwhelm our concern for one another's well being and create a painful, unsafe environment where a place of refuge should be.

The day the poet William Stafford died, he penned one brief line. Hours before he succumbed to a heart attack, Stafford wrote, "You don't have to / prove anything,' my mother said. 'Just be ready / for what God sends.'" I call on us this morning to lay down our feverish desire to prove to one another that we are right in our opinions, assessments, observations and perspectives and simply get ready for what God sends. For Christ is in our midst. The Lord gathers with us every time we draw together and the Anointed One, because of over powering love, doesn't see us as shadows of darkness or as bickering children in a perverse world. Jesus looks beyond the mess we so often make of our lives and relationships and church and sees people who can shine like stars. Christ sees us as a church with wondrous potential to reflect the love of God and that is why God will send us all sorts of people who want to come and see Jesus. All we have to do is get ourselves ready."