

Come and See

John 1:43-51

Sermon by Joanne Gallardo

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⁴³The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." ⁴⁴Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." ⁴⁶Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." ⁴⁷When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" ⁴⁸Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." ⁴⁹Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" ⁵⁰Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." ⁵¹And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

A few weeks ago, after work I took a look at my news feed on my phone. I find that over the past year I do so with a great amount of fear and trepidation. I was amazed that a certain crude, descriptive word, not censored, no stars or symbols where certain letters should be, was everywhere...followed by the word "countries." Who would say something like that? Who call those countries that word? A racist celebrity? An intoxicated congregespersion in an intercepted personal email? No, actually, it was our president. Our president used that word to refer to multiple countries where people with brown or black skin live, saying that he wants to stop, or impede, or limit immigration from those countries. Instead, he'd rather have immigrants from places like Norway, which of course, is a place where a lot of white people are from.

My immediate response was one of anger. I know people from those countries, and I'm sure you do, too, and I know these people to be just like anyone else. I hear them talk about their hometowns like any other person talking about their hometown...full of problems, but also full of people finding solutions, beauty, populated with moms and dads and sons and daughters doing what they need to do to survive and live a good life...just like anyone in any city or town across

America. I was also angry *at* America, for electing such a blatant xenophobic and racist man into office.

It then got me to thinking about how this latest administration is just a symptom of a larger problem. The disease is racism, the symptom is this administration that spews offensive words and ideas behind the keys of a smart phone or laptop tweeted out for all the world to read. Deep inside this disease is this idea of white virtue: this idea that white people are “correct, “good,” and “right.” It’s best for things to be done in a “white” way, by white people. It’s all over our popular culture in subtle ways. Dark things are sinister. There are horrible “black deeds.” White knights on white horses are good. A “white” lie is a lie that’s “not so bad.” This is the basis of fear of the “other,” that is, someone from someplace else that acts and speaks in ways unfamiliar to us. Skin color may not even be involved. It could be someone’s gender, or sexual orientation, or class. I think all of us have stories of comments, intentional and offhanded, that put down people on the basis of one of those factors. The “otherness” that we see that people possess...it’s scary to us. And when we’re scared, or we feel threatened, or we’re insecure about who we are and what we are about, we say things. Things that probably should never be said.

Just this past week, someone (not from Berkeley), in a rather awkward attempt to be funny, made a homophobic joke in my presence that was both random and offensive. I’m not so naive as to think everyone is for LGBTQ inclusion, and that’s fine. But in the wake of recent events, of Charlottesville and the Alt Right’s rise to more prominence, blatantly offensive statements of intolerance are lauded and held up as “free speech.” We’ve created a culture where it’s ok to say these things. And people who face discrimination on a daily basis are rather exasperated with those of us who have privilege because that’s the reality they’ve always known.

But the days of allowing those things to happen, to let comments slip by, are being challenged, and hopefully, they’re over. After this comment was made by the president, think pieces full of anger and retribution were everywhere. This comment Trump made reminds me a lot of our Gospel passage for today.

Nathanael doesn't mince words. Philip tells him that they've found the guy that Moses and the prophets talked about...oh, and by the way, his name is Jesus, he's from Nazareth, his dad is Joseph.

Nathanael doesn't say "Well, that's unexpected." He doesn't say, "That's interesting, tell me more." He instead says "Nazareth! Can anything good come from Nazareth?" I, of course, was not there but I've always imagined this being said in a rather obnoxious manner, maybe to get a rise out of Philip, or maybe his ignorance is just on full display. And Philip, instead of getting heated, or trying to combat what was said, simply states, "come and see."

"Come and see." A very kind and generous way to say "Let me show you how you are wrong." But he doesn't cut off conversation, he doesn't say "forget you, you don't get it." Philip sets out an invitation. Yes, you think this way about a group of people from a location that has a reputation. But come and see for yourself.

In the only positive move that Nathanael has made thus far, he chooses to follow Philip. He went to Jesus and found out that yes, good things can come from Nazareth. Holy and remarkable people come Nazareth. I hope that maybe, just maybe, he realized he had said something wrong.

What I like about Mennonite history is that service in other cultures and countries is encouraged and sometimes expected. It's in our DNA to "go and see." Another thing I appreciate about Mennonites who choose to look outside of their culture is that they learn that it's not always us "teaching," "helping" or "preaching" to our brothers and sisters in other countries, through every encounter, people from across the globe "teach," "help" and "evangelize" to us.

Oscar Siwali of Cape Town, South Africa works at the Quaker Peace Center and for the Center of Conflict Resolution. Four years ago he launched SADRA, which stands for Southern African Development and Reconstruction Agency, and his hope is that he teaches a new generation of peacemakers. They do peace education in violent schools, conflict transformation in communities, and they also do election monitoring. The goal is to build a society that embraces nonviolence, and Oscar sees God at work in South Africa through the work of

peace. Mennonites from the US and Canada have come to South Africa to help in the work God has already started there, learning from pastor Siwali and others.

The Machados are from Honduras. They came to the United States and received an education, Francisco got a degree at Eastern Mennonite Seminary, and Juanita also did biblical studies. After they were told a dream a church leader had about their life, which included serving in Guadalajara, Spain, they decided to follow the call they felt to become missionaries. They were told, by Mennonite Mission Network, that there was an opening in Spain for mission workers. They currently serve in Madrid, and while facing challenges living in a post-Christian society, they are passionate about planting churches and generating a revival in their new setting.

The Mennonite Church of Congo, the largest Mennonite denomination in Democratic Republic of Congo, wrote this letter to the Mennonite church here in the states in the weeks after the Las Vegas shooting of last year:

Our dear brothers and sisters,

It is with great sadness that we have learned of the carnage inflicted by an enemy of liberty that claimed the lives of 59 peaceful American citizens, and wounded many more. Our Department of Service and Development, on behalf of *The Mennonite Church of Congo*, shares the pain of the Mennonite churches in North America, and all the American people. We unite our grieving hearts with yours. May our Lord give you his peace. Be assured that the compassion with which we write this message of love and unity extends to those of you whom we know personally and to those whom we don't know. We count on you to pass on our love to those whom we can't reach directly. We are joined in prayer with you.

These are the countries and the people that Trump was talking about. These supposed "certain type" of countries are, in turn, serving us. Pastor Siwali is teaching North Americans how to be better peacemakers, the Machados are helping us gain mission partners in Spain, the Mennonite Church of Congo is praying for us, that we may know comfort. Sure, we have a lot of resources to offer, but this is a two way street of love, prayer, and service.

Nathanael approaches Jesus, who knows what he expected. I don't think he's yet convinced, but it does say something that he's actually willing to "come and see." He could have stayed behind, or said, "No, I'm good." Maybe he wants to see who this Jesus is so he can mock him, or prove his point about people from Nazareth. Jesus immediately knows Nathanael as an Israelite, and says that in him, there is no deceit. Nathanael is astounded. He asks Jesus how he knows him, and he says he saw him standing under the fig tree, which is something he couldn't have known. Nathanael takes back what he had previously said by saying "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel." Jesus waves his answer away by telling him that he only believes because of that minor miracle, but more than that, he's going to see things he's never seen before.

I think this lets Nathanael off the hook a little too easily. At the same time, I don't know what inner struggle Nathanael had after realizing what he said was prejudiced and incorrect. And I think that's my struggle as someone who believes in equality, and fairness, and justice, or at least, my brand of those things. I want people to realize they're wrong. I want people to come to some "metanoia" experience where their hearts and minds are changed. More than that, I want an apology. I want some big, public declaration of how misguided they were, their pledge not to do it again, and to henceforth promise not to say whatever racist or bigoted thought comes into their head. But that's my agenda stemming from my own experience and what I bring to the text.

To be fair, Nathanael does this in his own way by declaring Jesus the King of Israel. It doesn't take the form of an apology, but he is nevertheless convinced and changed. I bring a whole history of people who say hurtful and discriminatory things to my reading of Nathanael and Jesus. And I also bring my agenda of wanting people to say the exact opposite of what they had originally said. Of course I want Trump to declare welcome to people from all over the world. I want people to say positive and encouraging things to one another instead of ignorant and hurtful anecdotes.

I wonder if a better approach than my personal anger and hurt when I hear of such things or experiencing them myself can be found in Philip. Philip says 3 little

words, "Come and see." He doesn't go off on Nathanael, he doesn't even really call him out on his prejudice. Don't give me wrong, I think there's a time and a place for showing anger and for calling people out. But what if we approached racism and bigotry with an invitation?

Maybe it's similar to the invitation we give people to serve in other places, to experience other cultures. An invitation to leave what you think you know behind and enter into another person's world. While comfort can't be promised, being transformed is inevitable.

What if we also allowed ourselves to experience this same kind of transformation? This type of letting go that comes with the words "come and see?" Will we let go of our knee-jerk reactions, our anger, our intolerance of the intolerant? We know we might not get an apology, we might never get to see the transformation that happens in the other person, but still we offer the invitation to "come and see." Maybe we are transformed in the asking. By letting go and letting the Spirit do its work in another person as well as ourselves, we are letting go of our own agenda and allowing the Holy to take over. By the asking, we are letting go of all the things that we maybe want to say back. What are some of the things YOU need to "go and see?"

May we, by the transforming power of God's grace, both give and receive the invitation to encounter the Holy.