

Trinity Presbyterian Church, Ottawa  
Sunday, August 8, 2021

As I mentioned last week, I am working from a sermon series prepared by a group called A Sanctified Art. In addition to creating prompts and reflection questions for sermon preparation, they also explore the Scriptures through visual art, poetry, music and videos. It's really rich, beautiful material, and when I was preparing for this month of preaching, I was really drawn to their theme of "I've been meaning to ask...." It wasn't until later, until I began to dig into the text and the materials, that I discovered that this week's text from John is one that I preached from back in April as well. And, not only that, but as I read through Trinity's newsletters over the last few months, I fear that it may have been preached on by another guest preacher recently too. I hesitated at first to even include this passage, thinking perhaps this really was too much repetition in too short a period of time, but I actually think it's a great example of how rich the Scriptures are. I know I've talked to some of you about this over the years-how during different stages of life and in different scenarios in which we are living; Scripture speaks to us in countless, diverse ways. The themes and ideas I noticed in the text now are completely different from what spoke to me in April. And fittingly, the theme for this week's sermon also highlights the idea that individual stories, people, and even Jesus himself are so complex and full of depth that they require the interpretations of many people to truly flesh out the full story and full reality of who they are and what they mean.

Our theme today is "I've been meaning to ask...where are you from?" For many of us, I imagine this is a difficult question-by adulthood we may have called many places home. Home has looked different for us at different stages of life. For many, home is a place that only exists in our memories, people long gone, places and remembrances that conjure up nostalgia, yearning, sadness, and for some, pain. For immigrants, migrants, and refugees, home may be a place that they will never return-either a place

filled with so much pain and loss or a place now unattainable because of borders that make it impossible to ever return home. For people of color the question, “Where are you from?” highlights the inaccurate and insensitive idea that only certain people—who look a certain way, speak a certain language or have a certain racial or ethnic heritage, may truly be from, or belong, to a place. So, when I ask this question, or you ask it to each other in the days to come, “Where are you from?” I want you to pay attention to what you feel—what images or people come to mind, what emotions do you feel as you think about where you are from? I imagine whatever it is, is complex and rich, filled with both positive and also sensitive feelings. Perhaps over the next week you might ask yourselves these questions: What is your story? Where is your true home? What makes you, you? How has the particularity of a place shaped who you are and whose you are? And, as we look to the text of John, where might God be calling you to “Come and see”?

One of the main themes that stood out in the reading of John 1 this around was the prevalence of curiosity—and the fact that Jesus is the primary focus of such curiosity. John had already known Jesus as the Lamb of God and invited his disciples to meet him. The two disciples who follow Jesus apparently want to know where he is staying, but they ask questions only after he gives them permission. They are respectful of his space and enter it only at his invitation. It is the kind of healthy curiosity that is eager to engage others but is also not intrusive or unwelcome. But the disciples call Jesus a Rabbi, a term that does not capture his true identity in John. Instead of answering their question (where are you staying?), Jesus says, “Come and you will see.” The Greek word for seeing in this context is *horaw/oida*, which means “know, perceive, understand.” Jesus seems to suggest that the disciples called him Rabbi because they did not fully perceive him. He invites them to his place so that they can perceive him. Jesus is inviting them to a deeper level of curiosity, one that suggests their willingness to learn more about who he is, as well as to unlearn previous assumptions they may have held about Jesus. Such curiosity transcends superficial knowledge and

requires greater investment of one's time and resources. The disciples spent the day with him and called him Messiah.

Curiosity, it turns out, can also be contagious. Everyone is eager to meet and know Jesus in this passage. Andrew, who followed Jesus, introduces him to his brother Simon. Philip introduces him to Nathanael, who wishes to know if anything good can come out of Nazareth. "Come and see," says Philip. The subtext is: "Don't jump to any conclusions about anyone, or assume that you know about them based on insufficient knowledge." Professor Raj Nadella writes that "Curiosity should be consensual and also a two-way street." Nathanael hears about Jesus and approaches him, but Jesus had already learned about him enough to call him a person without deceit. It is a healthy, natural flow as the disciples and those around him come to know more and more about the fullness of who Jesus is.

What about you? Have you ever experienced or witnessed this kind of healthy, genuine curiosity in your life? And how can we cultivate deeper curiosity that grants a fuller understanding of others, especially those who look, dress, and think differently? It doesn't happen automatically, for sure, and it requires an investment of significant time and resources to learn about them, a commitment to unlearning prior assumptions when needed, and a healthy curiosity that engages others while also respecting their space and the limits to which they choose to engage and respond to us.

Another theme that jumped out to me reading this text is that idea that each disciple held a glimpse of who Jesus is-and that together all of those different titles and roles form a kind of patchwork understanding of him. Throughout this short passage, the disciples call or describe Jesus by these names: Lamb of God, Rabbi, Teacher, Messiah, The Anointed, Son of God, The one whom Moses in the Law and the prophets wrote, the King of Israel, the Son of Man. So many different titles, roles, and identities that seek to define who and what Jesus is. Of course, all of those names speak to a part of who Jesus is, a sliver of who he is and was and what he represents. But none of those titles alone would be sufficient enough to capture the full

identity and complexity of who Jesus is, was and will be. The Rev. Wright Pittman, one of the members of A Sanctified Art, writes that, “We need one another to discover the fullness of who Jesus is.”

This statement makes me reflect on my own understanding of God. How many people, communities, worship experiences, conversations, and sacred rituals over my lifetime have contributed to my understanding of God? What would my understanding of God be without worship, without communion, or baptism, without spirituality retreats, without prayer and song, without forgiveness and grace I have experienced, without holy and meaningful conversations, without experiencing the death of loved ones, without pastors, teachers and others spiritual mentors, without Lent or Advent or Easter or Pentecost, without the overwhelming love of certain friends or family, without the Scriptures? Remove just any of those expressions of faith-whether explicitly religious or not, and my understanding of God would change. Thank God too, that these worship experiences, conversations, relationships and holy moments will continue to happen to us-and that they will continue to shape and change our understandings of God, making them fuller and more complex and more true than they were before.

I thank God that we believe in a living God, a God who continues to breath new life and new stories into this world, every single day. There is no single story about Jesus, about God, and nor is there a single story about each one of us. And Rev. Pittman was right-we need each other to discover the fullness of who Jesus is, who God is, and who we are too. So friends, I invite you, like Philip did in the book of John, to “Come and see.” In this sensitive time, in which we are all still feeling vulnerable, I invite us to follow the example of the disciples, who were curious and interested in learning more about Jesus’ identity. I invite us to embark on the journey of deeply engaging with the people in our own homes, our own neighborhoods and our own communities as we ask the question that we’ve been meaning to ask-where are you from? And let’s do it with intentionality, with a respectful curiosity, and a desire to share mutually- so that it’s not just to

check a box of our list, assuring ourselves that we are good neighbors, but that such an effort comes from a deeper place. The exact questions will look different for everyone, as will the answers. And such effort is harder work for sure, because it involves a commitment to learning and unlearning about those around us, which requires time, genuine interest, and willingness to respect the boundaries of others. But the fruits of such efforts can build holy community, here in this place, allowing us to come to know, with the help of others, the fullness of God's beautiful people and creation. Amen.