

“See the Truth”

Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:35-51

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Think for a moment about what brought you here today. What sequence of events led to you sitting in this building right now? Maybe it was something in the very recent past; maybe just in the last few days someone or something made you consider whether being a part of the church would be worth your time. Maybe your presence here now has its roots decades in your past, when someone long gone or long forgotten taught you about Jesus or encouraged you in a time of need. Whatever brought us here today, we are at the end of an unbroken chain of faithful people giving and receiving the invitation to follow Jesus Christ. You were invited by someone who was invited, and they were invited, and on and on and on in a continuous line going straight back to Jesus Himself nearly two thousand years ago.

We're not here because we decided, all on our own, to do this today. We didn't sit down one day and try to deduce the deep truths of the universe, and through our own ingenuity make the conclusion that this is what God is like and how He has worked. The Bible is not just the product of human imagination and brilliance, and our songs are not merely the product of our own poetry, and our message is not something we made up, and the stories of our lives and what God has done in them do not stand on their own unconnected with anyone else. We are here today because each one of us was invited.

Do you remember that moment of call in your life? Was it a parent, a friend, a stranger, a voice on the radio, a long-dead saint whose words are preserved in a book, or maybe Jesus Himself through Scripture who first invited you, in one way or another, to “come and see”? Was it many quiet invitations over time, or one big one that dramatically set you on a different path? You were invited.

That's one of the beautiful things about our faith. Not only are we not in this alone, we are in this in an unbroken fellowship of wildly different people living in twenty centuries across tens of thousands of miles, speaking hundreds of different languages, singing songs of every description, gathering in catacombs and cathedrals and forests and deserts and everything in between, facing war and famine and persecution and loss, facing things we can't imagine and things we know all too well, who have faithfully passed on that message from one to another to come and see. Do you remember who first invited you?

That invitation goes back to Jesus Himself at the beginning of His ministry, just after He was baptized by John, finding this small cluster of men who would respond to the invitation and then pass it on to others. John the Baptist had been preaching for some time when Jesus arrives on the scene in the passage we read today, and he had already gathered a group of disciples around his teachings. John is the forerunner or announcer for Jesus, so when he declares that Jesus is the Lamb of God, the Messiah everyone has been waiting on, a couple of those disciples take the announcement to heart and start following Jesus. All throughout this story there are these interwoven threads of come, see, follow. There are overlapping invitations that lead to more invitations, and Jesus begins His preaching by inviting people to follow Him.

The invitation with the most detail is the call of a man named Nathanael. Jesus finds a man named Philip and invites him to follow. Philip in turn goes home and finds Nathanael and explains to him that their whole history and worship and belief has led up to this one man, Jesus. Nathanael is at first incredulous, wondering how the Messiah could possibly come from a place like Nazareth. That was how people thought back then: if you know where someone's from and you know their kin, that's all you need to know about them. A place like Nazareth was too small or out of the way or inconsequential or whatever to be a fit place for the home of the Messiah, Nathanael thought. We do the same thing, though: we don't have quite the same understanding they did of people as being members of a group rather than being individuals, but we still place value judgments on others based on a small part of the truth. Your job, if it's impressive enough, means you're instantly worthy of my respect. Or your education, or your circle of friends, or the clothes you wear, or whatever small piece of the truth of a person that we decide is the key to understanding the whole. "Can anything good come from someone like that, someone from there, someone who does that, someone who looks like that, someone who has friends like that?"

Nathanael at first thinks he has deduced the whole truth from only one small part of it, but then the invitation to come and see leads him to decide to overcome that initial impression and at least go to see what the fuss is about. And while he's approaching Jesus, still a distance off, Jesus declares that here comes a true Israelite "in whom there is no deceit." It's an odd sort of thing to say; maybe Jesus meant that here was a sturdy fellow who could be counted on to speak his mind instead of blathering on with what he thought people wanted to hear. Jesus tells Nathanael that "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree," which is again the sort of thing that leaves us scratching our heads. I've never heard anyone give a really satisfactory explanation for what Jesus meant here, but one thought is that fig trees were traditional places in that culture to hold theological studies, maybe so you have some snacks handy when you get peckish in the depths of some theological debate. Whatever it is, there's some insight in that statement that convinces Nathanael to follow Jesus in a pretty dramatic reversal: "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel."

He thinks he's seen Jesus already because he's seen people from Nazareth before, but Jesus has already seen the deep truth of Nathanael from a distance. The result, then, is that Nathanael sees the truth, and Jesus promises him that he'll see greater things and even more of the truth. God sees the truth about us, and when we come to understand that, it is then that we begin to see the truth of God. It is in being seen truly that we begin to see truly.

In that moment of invitation in your life, that moment when someone somewhere gave you enough of the message of Christ to start you on a path of faith, leading you here today and onward on that path tomorrow, in that moment and hopefully many moments in the meantime, someone saw the truth about you. Because the deep truth about Nathanael and Philip and Andrew and Peter and all the others is that they were capable of coming and seeing what God was doing. There were many other truths about their lives – some of them were fishermen or theology students or whatever other occupation, some were eager and some were reluctant, some would remain faithful and some would run and hide when it came to the crisis and some would even betray – many truths, but the deep truth of each of those souls is that they were capable of receiving that invitation to come and see. Each one was invited to become Jesus' disciple. The same was true of you at some point and in some way: whatever things are true about your life, the single most important truth, and the single truest

thing about you, is that you are invited to become Jesus' disciple. You are welcome to come and see. Jesus sees that truth in each person because there's nothing more true about any of us.

What truth do you want people to see about you? Facebook makes it easier to answer that question in some ways because it allows us to curate the truth we portray; it invites us to sift through the truths of our lives and show only what we want. That's nothing new, but our online lives take it to a new level. If someone posts an unflattering picture of you, you can just hide it from your timeline. If one of your friends is always posting annoying things, you can just unfollow them and you don't have to listen. You can hide the truths you don't want people to know about and trumpet the truths you're proud of. Even if you aren't on the internet, you can still work awfully hard to hide certain truths and shout others. What truth do you want people to see about you?

Or maybe it's more important to ask what truths do you want to hide from people? Many of us carry things that we think are too shameful, too silly, too dark, too confusing for others to know about us. So we hide the fact that we've been abused, or that we have abused, or that we're afraid and hurting, that we don't have all the answers, that we've made some terrible mistakes, that our families are struggling. We hide some of the deepest truths about ourselves but then we go on and define ourselves by those truths – I can't begin to get over the hurt in my life, but by golly I'll do my best to hide it from you – and those secrets drive so much of who we are and how we act and relate to others. But here's the thing: God knows those secret truths about you. And in fact, God knows them better than you do. He not only knows the things you hide from others, He knows the truths you hide from yourself and the truths you've long since forgotten in some dark corner. We see that time and time again in the life of Jesus, where people were trying to trap Him in semantics or trivia and He would look right through them and say exactly the truest thing that would leave them speechless. It wasn't His strategy for winning arguments and impressing people, it was His way of cutting through the obstacles to get to the truth of a person and call them to follow Him.

We read the first few verses of the book of 1 Corinthians, a letter written by the Apostle Paul to the church in Corinth. The Corinthian church was a wreck: we have two letters from Paul to this church preserved in our New Testament, and we know there was at least one other and possibly more, in which Paul is struggling to straighten out some serious problems. There were power struggles and factions breaking out, people were openly engaged in blatant sexual sins and then boasting about them as a sign of their freedom in Christ, people were taking the gifts God had given them and using them as badges of pride, members of the church were taking one another to court rather than settling disputes gracefully, and on and on. Most of us would write off a church like that as a lost cause. The people are too far gone, the leadership is falling apart, they have no credibility in the community, and they don't even seem to be aware that what they're doing is wrong. But Paul doesn't write them off because he knows the truth of them. He begins the letter by saying, "I always thank my God for you because of His grace given you in Christ Jesus." To be fair, he's starting the letter by being polite, but it's not only that. He goes on to remind them of the ways God has gifted them and will be faithful to them so that they "will be blameless" before Jesus; *even a church like this* can be blameless! "God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord," Paul says. There are a lot of truths about the church in Corinth, and not many of those truths are flattering. But the biggest truth, the truest truth, the one that really matters, is that even they are called to come and see.

The truth about every single person is that they are called to come and see what God is doing; every single person is invited to follow Jesus as His disciple. That ought to be the defining fact in each of our lives and each of our interactions with others. No one is good enough to deserve it, but no one is too damaged or too lost to be invited, and no one is so far gone that they are incapable of coming and seeing. Jesus sees this truth in every one of us, and we need to train our eyes to see it, too.

There's a passage from Isaiah's prophecies that we didn't read today but is often paired with these passages from John's gospel and 1 Corinthians. The first part of Isaiah 49 describes the Lord's servant and his work; it's one of those passages with a number of applications that have their fullest meaning when applied to Jesus. The Lord says to this servant that "it is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth." It's too small a thing for God's servants to invite those who have already come and seen. God's plan is bigger; His invitation is universal because that's the truth of every soul: everyone is invited to become Jesus' disciple.

Do you remember who first gave you that invitation? We are the church, the community of those who have responded to the invitation. In this community, we affirm the central truth of all souls, all people in here and in our neighborhoods and around the world, that everyone is invited to come and see what Jesus is doing. It's too small a thing for us to keep that invitation to ourselves, and it's too small a thing to leave yourself out of that invitation because you think God can't redeem someone like you. Come and see.



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