

January 17, 2021

Responding

Text: John 1:43-51

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, ‘Follow me.’ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip 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.’ Nathanael said to him, ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ Philip said to him, ‘Come and see.’ When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, ‘Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!’ Nathanael asked him, ‘Where did you come to know me?’ Jesus answered, ‘I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.’ Nathanael replied, ‘Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!’ Jesus answered, ‘Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.’ And 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.’

Sermon:

Walter Brueggemann calls it radical. He calls it an act of profound resistance and defiance. He calls a day like today radical—a day that we set aside to honor what is important. It’s a day that we set aside not to consume or make or produce, but rather to remember who we are and to whom we belong. Brueggemann would claim that days set aside are incredibly foundational. Tomorrow is another one of those days—a day that we might set aside to stop doing what we do in order to honor the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.—a worker of justice, a speaker of truth and a modern day prophet, a devout follower of Christ. The radical nature of the day has been transformed where it is no longer just a day of remembrance but also a day of service and a day to respond—remembering leading to response.

It is at the core the truth of today’s Gospel reading as well. I bet that no matter how old you are—even if you are as young as Jakey or as old as Barbara Bracknell—that if you close your eyes right now, I bet you can see Dr. King. Go ahead; shut your eyes for a moment. I bet you can see King come to life right before your eyes. What did you see? I know what I saw. I saw a visage of strength blended with compassion. I saw calmness infused with profound determination; I saw one made in the very image of God. A beloved child—I saw someone to look up to and live into. I bet at this very moment if you silence everything that you could actually hear Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. speak. I bet you could hear his voice with both thunder and quiet and proclaiming truth. Go ahead and listen.

Did you hear about dreams? Or maybe about mountaintops? Did you hear that cadence that drew me and millions like me in? I know I heard both a cheerleader and a challenger; I heard a call to action and a reassurance of what already is and what is mine to do and what is God’s. We are blessed that King lived in a time when the full command of his gifts could be recorded. He knew media’s potential. After the Selma riots, he said, “We are hear to say to the white men that we will no longer let them use clubs on us in dark corners. We’re going to make them do it in the

glaring light of television.” He also wrote a second letter from the Birmingham jail to Andrew Young, advising him how to use media. King told him, “In a crisis, we must have a sense of drama.” We have recordings of what King did and how he did it. They are messages that defy time and they are available even now to all those looking for strength, courage, love and humility in these hard times as the quest for racial justice continues. The beauty of these recordings is that he enlivened a whole movement, and he still does. It’s a movement that’s changing the whole world. What made people follow him, though, was not just his extraordinary oratorical gifts. I’m convinced instead that it was what King learned from Jesus.

King’s mantra was this, and I quote: “I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality.” Unarmed truth and unconditional love—these are words we need for today, right? I came across something from King that was so beautiful in its irony; he reminds us that while Caesar lived in a palace and Jesus died on the cross that that same Christ rose up and split history into “AD” and “BC,” so that even the life of Caesar must be dated by Christ’s very name. It’s the kind of commitment to patience and truth telling that we so need now. Patient unarmed truth and enduring unconditional love—how different these are from what we see in TV these days, amen?

It is that way that is at the heart of our reading this morning from John’s Gospel; it’s the story about how another movement got started—minus media coverage and without television cameras, but it was the movement that shaped King’s movement, grounded in the way Jesus lived. King observed that Jesus did not seek to overcome evil with evil; he overcame evil with good. Although crucified by hate, Jesus responded with aggressive love. If you keep reading past this first chapter, John’s whole Gospel is the story of Call and Response—of seeing and sharing, and the call to become responders and, God-willing—aggressive lovers. The great gift of John’s Gospel—that is *so* long—is that that length allows Jesus to have ongoing and profound dialogue and conversations with everyone he meets—with all different kinds of people, from the powerful to the powerless.

In Matthew, Mark and Luke, when the similar story of the call to disciples comes, Jesus simply says, “Come,” and the disciples—well, they do. Jesus says, “Drop those nets,” and the nets are dropped. Jesus does the calling and the disciples respond in good and faithful obedience, and there is nothing wrong with that. But in John’s Gospel, there is something profound for us to learn today. Jesus always engages in extended dialogue, always commanding only one thing and rarely ever answering the people’s questions for them. Instead, over and over, Jesus does what he does in this story. He offers the invitation to simply come and see—an invitation not just to a moment of ‘Aha’ or even astonishment—but to a deeper commitment to a life of faith and connection.

There are many voices today clamoring for allegiance, trying to achieve with their oratorical skills and their ability to convince us so that we say, ‘Aha, that’s the solution!’ There are voices seeking power and voices seeking simple solutions to complex and ongoing problems, if of course we just let them have a little more power—tempting—if only someone could fix all of this, right? It’s ironic, isn’t it that those are the exact kinds of temptations that Jesus faced in the wilderness—and the ones he categorically rejected. Instead in his lifetime, Jesus chose to ask questions; he chose not to seek power for himself but to empower others.

As you listen to the siren calls today, may that be the matrix for whom you choose to follow; for that matter, it's a long arc of justice that we pursue. In John's Gospel we get a glimpse of just how powerful this approach can be. While earlier in the Gospel, the first invitation to 'come and see' did come from Jesus, however, as the Gospel unfolds it is far more often placed on the lips of others who've accepted that invitation and can't believe what they have found. I don't know if you remember, but there's a blind man in John whom Jesus heals, and he is not content to just revel in the miracle of sight. He wants to tell people about the fullness of life and help them see things that they had been missing all along.

Do you remember that Samaritan woman? She goes and tells everyone she knows, "Come and see a man who knows me completely." And then remember the story of Nicodemus—a work in progress—the one who keeps showing up over and over again, first sneaking up in the dead of night and then finally standing boldly at the noontime hour in the view of everyone, taking a big risk for something good. Throughout John, the pattern is always on display and it is here too. You need to know this: it was John the Baptist who first prepared the way for Jesus to come; it was two of John's disciples who had long heard the Baptizer tell the stories of Jesus who would respond to the invitation to 'come and see.' It would be one of those unnamed disciples who would go and invite the most famous disciple of all—Peter. Friends, it is important to realize that Jesus did not come to Peter but that Peter was brought to Jesus. Who is out there right now, waiting for one of us to bring them to Jesus?

Now our translation this morning says that it's Jesus who finds Philip in the reading but that's inconsistent with the Greek grammar of the story and with the way that this process unfolds. The Greek grammar actually suggests that it's more likely that it was Peter who went to find Philip and then Philip who went to find Nathaniel and Nathaniel who finally comes to us this morning and so the real question is: who else needs to be found today? Nathaniel is a character we never see again in the Bible and whose name means, "God has given—may he be a gift to us." Pay attention to this interaction between Philip and Nathaniel because it's not easy, but it's real and it might even be why we don't go more often to seek and find and bring—because Nathaniel doesn't wind up saying, "Oh, thank you! Wow, sign me up! I'd love to come with you to meet this guy; this is what I've been waiting for." Instead, Nathaniel offers a response of skeptical incredulity. "Surely you can't believe such a thing!" he says to Philip. That response can speak to our own fears and doubts—one that wrongly suggests that the invitation is about *our* faith or *our* ability to answer or preach in ways that make this whole journey make sense. Because the amazing truth of Christ and the amazing way of life that we follow here doesn't make any logical sense; it supersedes logical sense. It is like that vision of King's where he said, "I could imagine one day where people will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." And every day we keep breathing and living and learning until more and more that vision becomes clarity, and what first seemed crazy now becomes possible and real.

Notice that Philip doesn't get defensive; he doesn't reject Nathaniel's question; instead, he sees it as a possibility—as a flickering flame of curiosity that needs wind to grow and not just our breath but *ruach*—the breath of life and Holy Spirit. Philip responds like we are called to respond. He responds with the language that Peter taught him or from the language that those unnamed disciples taught Peter, which was the invitation that came from Jesus, "Come and see," a response for all ages. When Nathaniel steps forward, a miracle happens and he is astounded.

It's the miracle of Christ knowing him and having seen him under the fig tree. Remember that psalm that we started out with today, "You know me. You know my lying down." It is a moment in which Nathaniel not only opens up but also boldly proclaims, "Jesus, you are the Son of God." Friends, too often proclamations like that are looked at as the pinnacle of faith, a finish line, but Jesus knows it's only a beginning, a starting point for a whole new way of life and a response.

We know that too—don't we friends? Those who seek to come and find us beyond any singular moment or event, no matter how moving, profound or transformative, no matter how glorious the Christmas Eve service is or how profound the reading or how beautiful the anthem—or how emotional the connection, that it's easy for all those moments to fade away and for the people to wander away. The depth of the gift of faith emerges from ongoing curiosity, from new experiences, from connection and community—to holding hands in the midst of indescribable joy and burden too. So Jesus adds that all that is cool but come and see, because you ain't seen nothing yet. It is what he teaches us to say, whether we've been here our whole lives or whether this is a new thing. Come and see and then respond.

Friends, I wonder how different it would be if there were cameras in the time of Jesus; I wonder how it might have helped, and also I worry about how it would have gotten in the way. It would have gotten in the way of curiosity of people and gotten in the way of our own responsibility to issue that invitation. Media focuses plenty on religion today; I don't think that helps either. For what people crave more often are stories of sensation rather than slow transformation. Stories about rages, answers and claims, rather than profound questions and quiet invitations. I hope that tomorrow we honor Martin Luther King. I also pray we remember a truth about the Civil Rights movement—that while those on camera had profound power and issued many invitations; just as profound was the quieter one from countless lips and hands of African American women in the South. Rarely on camera, those women were the backbone of telling the story, empowering the fearful, developing the systems of support and encouragement; they never made the camera but they made a big difference. We don't know most of their names and maybe we never will, but you know what? They responded, and others stepped into the story. We don't know the names of the two disciples of the Baptizer but they responded, and Peter got involved. We never meet Nathaniel again in the Bible, but he is held up by Jesus as the pinnacle of honesty and responsiveness.

This year—this week—in these times—may we be open enough to come and see, and just as importantly—to respond, knowing it is not primarily about what we know or even the words we find—but rather what people will experience through us in this transcending, transforming, utterly unbelievable true reality of life in Christ. We, like those before us, can do nothing more than repeat the divine invitation—with our lips and with our lives. Friends, come and see!

Amen.

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