

COME AND SEE, GO AND SHOW

The three Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark and Luke—are called Synoptic Gospels because they have many similarities. For example, all of them have a scene where Jesus called a group of ordinary people from their everyday, conventional lives and said to them, “Follow me.” The amazing thing is that, with such a simple, non-aggressive call, twelve people did follow Jesus, right at the beginning of his ministry, before he’d even preached a single sermon or performed one miraculous sign.

That’s kind of an odd response, don’t you think?

The expected response—the response you and I would most likely give to his invitation to come and follow, besides “Please leave me alone and go bother somebody else”—would be a question or three right back at Jesus: “Who are you? Where are you going? And why should I follow you?” But Peter, Andrew, James, John and the rest of the crew never asked Jesus any questions. They just toddled off after him, even though they knew next to nothing about him.

After giving it some thought, I’ve concluded that that’s probably how Jesus’ call happened to most of us. We also began to follow Jesus even though we knew next to nothing about him at the time.

Think about it. Most of us were baptized into the church, the Body of Christ, while we were still in diapers and drinking our meals from a bottle. Maybe our parents read us Bible stories from a picture book when we were growing up. Then we got a little more in depth introduction to Jesus in Sunday School, beginning when we were, what, five or six years old?

But at that age, we really knew little or nothing about Jesus. He was a virtual stranger to us. And even as we grew older and learned more about him in our Sunday School classes and drew pictures of him for a class assignment, we were pretty much ignorant of this man who lived two thousand years ago, whom we were being taught to follow.

We started our Christian faith journey by simply familiarizing ourselves with this Jesus fellow and learning, in simple ways that our child-minds could grasp,

what it meant and what it required to be a follower of his.

When I was a teenager and still a practicing Catholic, I remember a priest giving a sermon about Christianity and our responsibility to witness to Jesus and tell people about our Christian faith. One of the things the priest said was that, if we did our jobs the way we should and went about telling people who Jesus was and what the Christian faith was all about, they would be breaking down the doors of our churches, wanting to get in and be a Christian and follow Jesus.

I took the priest at his word back then; but I don't really believe that any longer. You see, I know too much about Jesus now. I know just how much Jesus expects of his followers, wanting us to put him before anyone and anything else we love in this world, loving our enemies, turning the other cheek when one of them is struck, forgiving even the most hurtful offenses committed against us, and giving away a hefty portion of our wealth to help the poor and needy.

Today I believe that the more we know about Jesus, the more likely it is that we will be scared away from following him. There's even evidence in the Scriptures to back that up. Later on in John's Gospel, the author wrote that some of the first followers of Jesus no longer went around with him after they got to know him better and heard more of his teachings.

You know, there are people—grown adults—who've been following Jesus their whole life based on what they learned about Jesus as a child. They're still carrying around in their heads little bits and pieces of images and impressions about Jesus that they picked up in Sunday School. Their understandings about other things have matured and changed and grown, but their Christian faith hasn't. Such individuals have, in effect, checked out of the adventure of letting their Christian discipleship and their faith be relevant to their present, adult lives.

Now, don't misunderstand. I'm not saying that what we learned about Jesus when we were kids isn't important, doesn't matter or should be totally dismissed. I mean, one of the most important theologians of the 20th century, Karl Barth, was asked near the end of his life what was the most important thing he ever learned as a Christian and a scholar. This elderly and very wise scholar, who had written extensively and was so influential in the field of theology, thought for a moment; then he smiled and said, "Jesus loves me, this I know. For the Bible tells me so."

So, yes, the simple foundation of our faith that we learned as children has its place, but we shouldn't stop there. There's a lot more we need to learn about Jesus, about Christianity, and about what it truly means to follow Christ—especially in this tumultuous and pretty frightening 21st century world we live in.

It can be a very scary thing, learning new stuff about Jesus and our faith.

We like it, and we think we have it made, when we convince ourselves that we already know everything that needs to be known about those subjects. But at the same time, gaining new knowledge and an evolved understanding of Jesus and what it is to be a disciple of Christ can be exciting and thrilling, and can enrich our lives immensely.

Think back over your own faith journey. Reflect on your very earliest memories of your first days as a Christian, if you can even remember when you weren't a Christian. Now, think about those wonderful, and perhaps even startling moments when you learned something new about Jesus; when you listened to some verse of Scripture that you'd never heard or paid much attention to before, and suddenly it spoke to you and your life situation; or somebody said something to you about the Christian faith that shed new light on your discipleship.

Just like the first disciples, you and I came to Jesus at a point in our lives when we knew little about him. We risked. We asked the Lord, "Who are you? Where are you going? Where do you want to take me?" And Jesus responded, "Come and see." And here we are! We came to Jesus when he was pretty much a stranger to us. We had no concrete evidence that it was the right thing to do, but we made a move toward Christ just the same. And gradually, over time, our eyes were opened more and more to who Jesus was to us and what Jesus wanted from us.

And that growth process is intended to go on for our entire lives. We should never stop learning about Jesus and the meaning and implications of Christian discipleship. Because that's the way Christian discipleship is supposed to be. We respond first, then learn and figure out the specifics of following Jesus later. We respond to Jesus' call, and only afterwards do we really find out who it is we're actually following and where he's leading us. Of course, if we ask, "Lord, what's our destination? What's the goal?" Jesus doesn't usually give us an immediate and clear answer. Instead Jesus tells us, "Come and see."

My friends, do you realize that today, right now, Jesus is still calling you and me to follow and to come and see, and our eyes are continually being opened to new possibilities of Christian discipleship? Our eyes get opened in various ways: perhaps through this sermon I'm preaching; or because of a hymn that we sang earlier or will sing later on in the worship service; or because of something we heard or read in the Bible; or through the witness or example of another disciple of Christ downstairs at Neighboring. Jesus opens our eyes because Jesus doesn't like blindness—be it physical blindness or spiritual blindness. Jesus is all about

seeing and vision and opening the eyes of those who are stumbling around in the darkness. Don't be blind, Jesus says. Let me be your eyes. Trust in me. Follow me. Come and see what I have in store for you and for the world.

But, Christian discipleship isn't only about coming and seeing. It's very important, to be sure; but even more important is the follow through. In other words, what do we do after Jesus invites us to come and see? I believe that after we come and see Jesus, we're then called by him to go and show Jesus to others. There's an ecclesiastical word—a church word—for that action, for following Jesus' call to go and show: "Evangelism."

Now, we all know the word "evangelism" carries a lot of baggage with it, some of it not so good, in my opinion. It conjures up images of people knocking relentlessly on our doors, trying to hand out their religious literature to us; or someone on the street shaking a Bible in our faces and shouting that we need to repent or risk being thrown the eternal fires of hell. But for me personally, evangelism, or going and showing to others the Jesus we ourselves came and saw, isn't anything like that.

I believe evangelism is actually a good thing! Even a joyful thing!

About twenty-five years ago, the United Church of Christ denomination, with whom this church has an affiliation, created an important document called *An Affirmation of Evangelism*. And I think it effectively captures what it means to go and show our faith to others. Here's what that affirmation of evangelism says:

"We celebrate the evangelical faithfulness of our forebears, and the church that was given to us by God through their witness.

"We confess that, too often in our time: "We hesitate to speak the name and tell of the power of Jesus Christ;

"We fail to trust God's saving grace, already given in Jesus Christ for the sake of the whole creation;

"We refuse to witness to the presence and action of the Holy Spirit in our midst and in the world;

"We conform with cowardice to the ways of the world.

"Today we welcome with joy an awakening to God's will, a stirring of the Holy Spirit among us, and a reclaiming of the presence and the person of Jesus Christ in the Church.

"We affirm evangelism as the heart of the Church's life and mission.

"We understand evangelism to be: "The proclamation of the Good News of God's gift of salvation in Jesus Christ; and

"Embodying and demonstrating this Good News in acts of mercy, love and justice; and "Inviting others to accept Jesus Christ as Risen Savior, to unite with

Christ's Body, the Church, and to live as Christ's disciples in the world.

"In response to Jesus' call to make disciples, we, as members of the [church of Jesus Christ], will: "Participate joyfully in revitalized corporate worship;

"Recommit ourselves to a personal devotional life of Bible reading and prayer;

"Witness to Jesus Christ by who we are, what we are, and what we do;

"Invite other people to follow Jesus, be baptized into Christ's death and resurrection, and become one with us in the Church of which Christ is the Head;

"Reclaim the teaching ministries of the church and support the teaching mission of our seminaries;

"Become reconciled communities of faith that are inclusive of the differences within the human family and find their enduring unity in Jesus Christ.

"With thanksgiving for the Good News which is the truth that sets all people free, we rejoice in the power and presence of the Triune God, to whom be honor and glory."

My dear friends, can you see that we're much like the first disciples who came to Jesus, who first saw, grew in trust and faith, and then went and showed by their evangelism? That same way of discipleship continues to this day, and we're a part of it, individually and together as a church. There are many people in the world—a lot of them right here in our own community and State, because Maine is last in the nation when it comes to people who are associated with a church and regularly attend worship—who have never really seen Jesus, heard Jesus' call, or experienced Jesus' presence and power in their lives. If we know such a person, perhaps a family member, a friend or a co-worker, we should pray that one day they will come and see Jesus in their midst.

Better yet, we should be an evangelist and show them Jesus. We should talk to them. Be a witness to them. Manifest Christ's life in our lives. Because we who have seen Jesus; who have, throughout our lives, grown in faith, come closer to Jesus over time, and experienced Jesus' presence in various, sometimes surprising and unexpected ways, have an important responsibility: to open other people's eyes and show Jesus to them through our words and our actions, so they might come and follow him just like us, and just like the first disciples did. Amen.