

## COME AND SEE

### JOHN 1:29-42

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel." And John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God." The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!"

The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter).

Recently you heard me talking about the rapid decline in religious attendance in the United States and especially in New England. The decline has been going on for nearly 50 years, but even more so in the last 10. Churches are not only becoming smaller, but also older and grayer. Many are closing their doors or merging with other churches, which makes a lot of sense when you've got lots of churches in a small town and they are all struggling.

Many churches and denominations have tried advertising campaigns like buying up billboards along highways or launching ads on television. Here is one that came out about 10 years ago from the UCC:

*Church bells chime. Two muscle-bound men stand arms-crossed in front of a Gothic cathedral. A gay couple approaches holding hands. "Step aside, please," say the muscle-bound guards. They speak similar words to an African-American girl, a Hispanic man, a young man in a wheelchair. Then, just as we realize that the two large men are "church bouncers," the scene fades to black and the tag line reads: "Jesus didn't turn people away. Neither do we."*

That 30 second commercial set off a firestorm of debates, and some networks refused to show it, saying it was too controversial.

Why is being hospitable to outsiders so controversial? I like the way Jesus dealt with the woman brought to him by the religious men of the community who discovered her committing adultery. The men wanted to stone her to death, which is what the tradition had been for a thousand years. It was in the Bible-she was to be stoned to death. But Jesus said to them "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone." They all dropped their stones and walked away. Jesus was showing hospitality! Those who walked away were left simmering.

In the Hellenistic world of the first and second century, the peculiar way that early Christians practiced hospitality set them apart from the surrounding culture. Greeks and Romans prized hospitality, but understood it to be discriminate. It was directed toward family, friends and influential social contacts -- those who could easily reciprocate the host's goodwill. Christian hospitality, on the other hand, was notoriously indiscriminate. Not only were all welcome, but it was those least

likely to reciprocate -- the widowed, the orphaned, the slaves, the outcasts and the estranged -- who were its primary recipients. In a modest way, Christian hospitality cut against the grain of social propriety and courted controversy in the ancient world.

Hospitality has always been a controversial subject, especially for Jesus. He was criticized for keeping company with prostitutes, adulterers, politicians, the poor and the sick, the outcast and the crippled. His closest followers and Jesus himself were often ridiculed by the religious elite for not observing rituals and practicing proper manners. They were called gluttons and drunkards. Jesus' hospitality knew no limits, had no boundaries, and was promiscuous.

But for those who had been ostracized from society, the church was a safe haven, and it started with the way Jesus went about inviting people to his church. By being born in the flesh, Jesus became one of us, the Divine taking on human form and becoming fully united with us. God's deepest desire was to be completely united with humankind, experiencing all of the joys and pains of humanity.

To become a follower of Jesus didn't require passing a litmus test, nor did it necessitate ascribing to any creed or set of beliefs. The pattern can be seen in a story from the Gospel of John. Two men approach Jesus and ask, 'Where are you staying?' Jesus replies, "Come and see," and Andrew rushes to find his brother Simon. It is such a simple story, but John seems to want us to see something significant. He concludes with the words that signal the beginning of the Christian church "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Peter." John wants us to see that simple words of invitation are more crucial to the life of redemption than even proclamations of faith. This is how the church begins; with an invitation offered to someone who is in search of a life worth living, a life with deep meaning.

Twenty eight years ago I was in Abilene, TX doing my counseling internship, and one of the individuals I was counseling was gay. He had been rejected by his family, as well as the church he had grown up in. He was told he could not be gay and be a Christian. He had been to several so called Christian therapists before me, and all of them had told him he had to stop being gay, as if it were some sort

of conscious choice, or like it was a switch that could be turned off and on. He knew in his heart that he was gay but he also knew that his church condemned homosexuality.

I encouraged him to try a new church I had heard about that was meeting in a house nearby. It was the Metropolitan Community Church, a new denomination founded by a gay pastor named Mel White. The church was a place where both straights and gays were welcomed and not judged for their sexual orientation. My client was reluctant to go because he had been rejected by every church he had ever attended. I told him to just go and see.

The next week when I saw him he was so excited. He was pleasantly surprised to find a welcoming community comprised of people of every race, a church where he could be gay and Christian, a church where he could be the man God had created him to be.

Twenty-five years ago I sat in a church pew with my family and I heard a sermon where the minister said women could not have any leadership role in the church, but instead were to be silent, and submissive to their husbands. The pastor quoted Scripture after Scripture to prove his point. I looked over at my daughter who was seven years old at the time, gathered up my family, and walked out of that church and began looking for a church where maybe someday my daughter could become a minister if she were called by God. Within a month my family had found a new church, and the church had a woman minister on staff.

Christ came to earth not to judge us, but to love us as we are, to take down the walls that divide us, and to unite us together as a new kind of community we call the kingdom of God. If you know someone who is searching for love and acceptance, if you come across anyone who is hurting and feels neglected, invite them to come and see what kind of church we are. Tell them that Jesus welcomes everyone, and so do we. Just come and see.