

“Meeting Jesus”

Psalm 40:1-11; John 1:29-42

“When Jesus turned and saw them following him, he said to them, ‘What are you looking for?’” John 1:38

A Sermon Preached by Catherine Foote
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I love listening to the NPR series “This I Believe.” If you haven’t heard it yet, let me encourage you to listen for it. Folks are invited to read a brief essay they have written explaining some basic belief they hold and why. The whole series has been a treat- and both ordinary and very well-known people have written essays. I have enjoyed every one of them for a variety of reasons. But two weeks ago I heard something in an essay that I want to make into a personal spiritual practice. The writer was Sister Helen Prejean. She is the catholic nun who began a ministry to death row inmates, and wrote about it in her book, *Dead Man Walking*. Here is a bit of what she said in her essay:

I watch what I do to see what I really believe.

Belief and faith are not just words. It's one thing for me to say I'm a Christian, but I have to embody what it means; I have to live it. So, writing this essay and knowing I'll share it in a public way becomes an occasion for me to look deeply at what I really believe by how I act.

"Love your neighbor as yourself," Jesus said, and as a beginner nun I tried earnestly to love my neighbor — the children I taught, their parents, my fellow teachers, my fellow nuns. But for a long time, the circle of my loving care was small and, for the most part, included only white, middle-class people like me. But one day I woke up to Jesus' deeper challenge to love the outcast, the criminal, the underdog. So I packed my stuff and moved into a noisy, violent housing project in an African-American neighborhood in New Orleans.

I saw the suffering and I let myself feel it: the sound of gunshots in the night, mothers calling out for their children. I saw the injustice and was compelled to do something about it. I changed from being a nun who only prayed for the suffering world to a nun with my sleeves rolled up, living my prayer. Working in that community in New Orleans soon led me to Louisiana's death row.

So, I keep watching what I do to see what I actually believe.”

I keep watching what I do to see what I actually believe, she says!

This month we are looking at call. How did the disciples come to meet Jesus, and what did that mean to them? And how do we, gathered here, meet Jesus? What does that meeting mean to us? What are we looking for? And, finally, how might we keep watching what we do to see what we actually believe?

John's story of Jesus is different from the gospels we call the Synoptics- Matthew, Mark and Luke. Of the four gospels in our canon, John was the last one written, and much of the material in John (in fact about 90 percent of the first eleven chapters) does not appear in the other three gospels. The memory of Jesus by the time John was written, you see, is intertwined with a deep faith in an identification of Jesus as the Christ, the son of God. John's gospel is not "the story of what happened" so much as it is the gospel of the community's experience of their faith. It is why we are both cautious about John, filtered as it was by such extreme subjectivity, and yet drawn to John. It is why John has been used both as a gospel of hate (it has been a primary source of the justification of anti-Semitism in the Christian church) and a gospel of love. Stories such as the woman at the well and the visit of Nicodemus to Jesus at night, which ends with the message the God loves the whole world, are unique to John.

And here in the beginning of John's gospel we find the disciples being called. This picture too is unique. Although we imagine the call of the disciples as happening by a lakeshore, with fishing nets being left behind, (and in fact we will sing that image later in this service- one of this congregation's favorite hymns, by the way)- here we find a different picture. John the Baptist points the way and the disciples begin to gather. And not only do they gather, but they start bringing others as well.

And at the heart of the call is the question, "What are you looking for?"

It is a question we could well ask ourselves this morning. What are we looking for; we who have decided to follow Jesus? What does our discipleship mean to us?

Deep discipleship I would suggest involves a sense of knowing the nature of one's times, the nature of one's gifts and the nature of the gospel.

It is not an easy intersection. It requires a great deal of truth telling. And we will often miss the mark- in fact John's gospel is all about the missing and then the deepening. But in the end, as we walk this discipleship path, we can keep watching what we do to see what we actually believe.

This weekend we remember Martin Luther King Jr. He was a man who was called- just like Peter, and Andrew, and Nathaniel. The nature of his times, and the nature of his gifts, and the nature of his faith came together and insisted on his call, and to our benefit, to the benefit of all gathered here today (because "no one is free when any one is oppressed") he answered that call. And we were all invited to watch what he did to see what he actually believed.

But just like the disciples in the gospel of John, who with every profession of faith are invited to go even deeper, Martin Luther King deepened his sense of call as well. He began to see how every policy of our nation was tied together. He began to see how economic justice was a part of the call for racial justice. And finally, he began to see how he must offer all that he had for the sake of the truth that he knew.

In the middle and late sixties, as the Viet Nam War escalated, King began to speak out against it. Many of those around him suggested that this was not what his mission was about. They suggested that to speak about the war might mean losing some of what he had helped us all gain in the area of racial equality. In fact, his words against war, some say, were dividing the very community he had united with his words against racism.

But sometimes a call means risking even the good that has come in order to go deeper and to seek more. And King could not help but tell the truth about what he saw. So he began to speak out against the war.

At the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., in 1968, (the year in fact, in which he was assassinated), Dr. King preached a sermon called "Sleeping Through the Revolution." Here are some of the words from that sermon:

I want to say one other challenge that we face is simply that we must find an alternative to war and bloodshed. Anyone who feels, and there are still a lot of people who feel that way, that war can solve the social problems facing mankind is sleeping through a great revolution. President Kennedy said on one occasion, "Mankind must put an end to war or war will put an end to mankind." The world must hear this. I pray to God that America will hear this before it is too late, because today we're fighting a war.

I am convinced that it is one of the most unjust wars that has ever been fought in the history of the world. Our involvement in the war in Vietnam has torn up the Geneva Accord. It has strengthened the military-industrial complex; it has strengthened the forces of reaction in our nation. . . .

It has played havoc with our domestic destinies. . . (For every person we kill in this war) we spend about five hundred thousand dollars while we spend only fifty-three dollars a year for every person characterized as poverty-stricken in the so-called poverty program, which is not even a good skirmish against poverty.

Not only that, it has put us in a position of appearing to the world as an arrogant nation.

. . . . And we could go right down the line and see that something must be done—and something must be done quickly. We have alienated ourselves from other nations so we end up morally and politically isolated in the world. . . .

This is where we are. . . .

It is no longer a choice, my friends, between violence and nonviolence. It is either nonviolence or nonexistence. And the alternative to disarmament, the alternative to a greater suspension of nuclear tests, the alternative to strengthening the United Nations and thereby disarming the whole world, may well be a civilization

plunged into the abyss of annihilation, and our earthly habitat would be transformed into an inferno that even the mind of Dante could not imagine.

And how shall we be disciples today? Are we people who long to meet Jesus? If so, we must keep watching what we do to see what we actually believe.

Consider the nature of our times. We are once again a nation at war. And once again we can say with Dr. King, that this is a war which has torn up the Geneva Accords. This is a war that has isolated us even from our friends. This is a war that has sacrificed domestic compassion in the name of international aggression. This is a war where truth has been silenced- we are not allowed to really see and understand the costs, both in lives and in dollars.

Consider the nature of our gifts. We are a church with a strong history of standing for justice. We are a church that has been blessed with many good things. And we are a church who now is being asked to go deeper.

And consider the nature of our faith. God expects something of us for the sake of the wider world. Last week many of you met my brother, who was here visiting. He is not a church-goer, but he was visiting me, his pastor-sister, so I brought him along with me on Sunday. And he was here from 7:30 in the morning until 9:30 at night. Thank you to all who made him feel welcomed. He liked what he found here. I think if he lived here, he would come back often. Anyway, he and I got to talking about the war in Iraq, and I asked him what he thought we could do. He started telling me what the president should do, and what the congress should do. "Yes," I said, "but what can one individual do?" "Well," he said, "I don't know what one person can do. But I do know that our leaders, those who took us into this war, are paper tigers. Their policies are morally bankrupt. They have no real power, and they know it."

As he was speaking, I heard a call. We are people who can tell the truth. Our times and our gifts and our gospel insist on that. And I think if we keep telling the truth, and insisting on hearing the truth, about this war, I do think we can find a way out. It won't be easy, it never is. And it can be very costly to follow a call. Consider again Martin Luther King.

But we have a call, each one and every one of us. We are people who long to meet Jesus. Let us then, each one and together, keep watching what we do to see what we actually believe.