

The Advent of the Ordinary

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The Community Church of Sebastopol
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John 1:43-51

Retired United Methodist Bishop, William Willimon, shares this story: “In my junior year of high school, I participated in a Sunday School class like none I had ever been a part of. Up to that point, all of my Sunday school teachers had been women. But that year a man was assigned to be our teacher, a business man in our congregation. Perhaps because my own father was absent, I really, really loved that class. He was a wonderful teacher. Sometimes he would begin the class by sharing some dilemma that he was facing in business. He would tell us about the problem he was struggling with and then would ask us, ‘What do you think I ought to do...as a Christian? What would Jesus want me to do?’ Other times he would talk about relationships or recall issues he faced when he was our age. We had never had an adult talk to us so straightforwardly. He treated us like we were equals in discipleship. It was a wonderful class.

“Well, many years later I was invited back to my home church to preach. At the social time afterward I was anxious to see if Larry was there – the best Sunday school teacher I ever had – the man who had so influenced my own spiritual development. Finally I was able to seek him out. I shook his hand effusively and said, “Larry, I want you to know that I have often thought of that year that you were our teacher in Sunday school. I will never, ever forget it.’

“ ‘I’ll never forget that year either,’ he replied, rather glumly, ‘no matter how hard I try.’

“ ‘What?’

“He continued, ‘I told the preacher I wasn’t cut out to work with kids. I’m no teacher. I don’t know that much about the Bible. But he said they had asked everybody else and they had all refused. So what else could I do?’

“ ‘This was the class you us taught in 1963?’ I asked in astonishment.

“ ‘Yeah, that one. You kids didn’t listen. All you wanted to do was talk to each other. I’ve never let a preacher put me into a mess like that again!’”

Larry...just an ordinary guy, doing his best but believing he had failed, that he hadn’t made a difference. He had no idea the lives he had touched; no idea that he, a reluctant disciple, had in fact done a wonderful job of teaching and calling other disciples.

“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Nathaniel asks Philip. “Are you kidding me? A messiah, from Nazareth?” Nazareth - just an ordinary little town full of ordinary little people, people like Larry, just trying to get by. Messiahs never come from a place like Nazareth...do they? Nathaniel had a point. Think of it...if you were trying to dream up a really useful god, who would fulfill your every wish, run your every errand, give you wealth and love and security, or whatever it is we think we need in life, would you have dreamed up someone like Jesus, described by one scholar as “a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant.” Jesus from Nazareth ? Would you have picked him? I doubt it. But God did. Oh, by the way, whether or not we choose to pick Jesus is really not the issue here. Rather, we need to consider the very real possibility that Jesus has now picked us – has plans to use us.

Our daughter-in-law, Camie, is a Louisiana girl, born and raised in Baton Rouge. Don’t want to sit too close to her when the LSU Tigers are on TV. I’ve learned that in her part of the country, family name, ancestors and the past still count for something. It is not uncommon to hear someone ask about a stranger or new comer, “Who are his/her people?” It is an inquiry into identity, an attempt to fathom the mystery of another human being by uncovering where he or she began. I still remember a young clerk in a convenience store, after I had said about three words, looking me in the eye and saying, “Y’all ain’t from around here, are you?” How did she know? Who are your people?

And this interest in beginnings, in one’s “people”, can cut both ways. After Jimmy Carter fell from favor, a South Carolina matron, commenting on his Georgia roots, was heard to say, “What would you have expected from someone whose people were a bunch of ex-convicts form England. Never did trust anyone from Georgia.” Sounds rather like Nathaniel: You can’t really expect much from someone whose people come from Nazareth. And it becomes very easy to convince ourselves that Jesus really can’t expect much from people like us, either...just ordinary folks. But he does.

New Zealand author, Mike Riddell, wrote a story a while back about two people, Vincent and Marilyn, who meet and fall in love. Neither of them is seeking a relationship, but it seems a

relationship is seeking them. Swept up by their emotions, the two become deeply involved. Marilyn is a prostitute and is not prepared to fall in love. She is certainly not prepared for the honesty love requires. She must tell Vincent who she truly is, but knows such disclosure will probably end their relationship. The moment for honesty finally, inevitably arrives. They are at dinner.

“Vincent...there’s, ah, something we need to talk about.”

“Only if you want to. I’m happy just to sit here and look at you, but this looks like something serious.” He fears she is going to break up with him.

“It’s about me and what I do.”

“Yeah, I wondered when you were going to pluck up the courage to talk about it. You work for the CIA, right? Sorry, sorry. I’ll shut up.”

She is totally absorbed in the remains of her salad, scrutinizing it for something. Anything to avoid his eyes. “There’s no easy way to say this. I’m a prostitute. I sleep with men for my living. It’s my business.” She looks up at last from her salad. Vincent is crying, the tears streaming down his cheeks as he bites his lip to stop his sobbing.

“I’m sorry,” she says, “I didn’t mean to deceive you. I’m sorry.”

He can’t speak. He wants to, but nothing is working. He is looking at her, at her beautiful face, her eyes. She reaches a hand across to hold his. She is beyond tears, empty and bleak and barren. Vincent is mumbling something but is incoherent through the pain. And then he begins to repeat it again and again: “I love you, I love you, I love you.”

She expects criticism; what she receives is understanding. She expects rejection; what she hears, over and over again, is “I love you.” Nothing has changed; but everything has changed. She is still the same woman she was five minutes earlier, none of the facts of her life have changed, and yet, she isn’t the same woman she was five minutes earlier. No longer a hostage to her bad choices, or to her past, she is free, freed by his unconditional love. It’s a story about grace, acceptance, forgiveness, new beginnings. But it’s also a story, not only about two wounded people seeking love, but also about God and humanity, God and us. Apparently God, the one who, according to Paul, chooses to work with what is foolish and weak and low and despised in the world, thinks that something very good indeed can come out of Nazareth, that something good can come out of each one of us, no matter what our past or failures or shortcomings, no matter how ordinary or un-special or unworthy we may feel.

That really is the scandal of the Messiah, of incarnation. Nathaniel and many others over the years wait for a Messiah who will deliver us from our humanity, from this limited condition that has always trapped us and traps us now. Then, to our surprise, he come to us the way God always does, as one of us: embracing our humanity, our history, our strength and weakness, our ordinariness, inviting us to become part of the promise. And that invitation does not come because of who we are. It is about who we can become once Christ has enlisted us in his work, work that makes our lives more meaningful than they ever could have been if left to our own devices. As one pastor has said, “Jesus is not here for us to get what we want out of God. Jesus is God’s means of getting what God wants out of us; God moving ever more deeply into this battered yet holy humanity in which Jesus was pleased to dwell.”

Martin Luther King, Jr., was a great man, yet also as flawed and imperfect, as foolish and weak, as any of us. And yet God chose him as God’s witness to raise us up from our bondage to the things that are to the liberty of the things that can and ought to be. Not long before his death, he said this to his congregation at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta: “Every now and then I think about my own death, and I think about my own funeral. If any of you are around when I have to meet my day, I don’t want a long funeral. And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell them not to talk too long. Every now and then I wonder what I want them to say. Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize...that isn’t important. Tell them not to mention that I have many other awards...that’s not important. I’d like someone to mention that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to give his life serving others. I’d like someone to say that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to love somebody. I want you to be able to say that day that I did try, in my life, to feed the hungry, clothe those who were naked, that I did try to visit those in prison. I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity.” He then concluded with these words: “I won’t have any money left behind. I won’t have the fine and luxurious things of life to leave behind. I just want to leave a committed life behind.” And so can we all, when, no matter who we are or what our circumstance in life, we accept Philip’s invitation to “come and see.”