

## Truth Dazzles Gradually

John 1:29-42

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In today's Scripture, there is a lot of folk wondering and asking of Jesus, "Who is this guy?" and "What's he about?" They know that John the Baptist has just baptized Jesus and has referred to him as the Lamb of God. They know John is treating Jesus with deference and there is some expectation that Jesus might be the Messiah. But who is he really? If he is the Messiah, what kind of Messiah?

Jesus notices their curiosity and asks, "What are you looking for?" They respond somewhat strangely, "Where are you staying?" Not who is your family? Not where are you originally from? But "Where are you staying?"

What they are looking for, what they seek, is not so much the information of the teacher, otherwise Jesus could have handed them his book or directed them to his website. No, they want to know *him*. The word we translate as "staying" refers to the source of one's life and meaning. So when these two disciples ask Jesus, "Where are you staying?" they are asking, "What is it that sustains you? Where do you remain? Where do you live? How do you live? Who are you really?" It's the same word used in John later, over in chapter 15, when we are told we are to abide in Christ. Where do you abide?

Jesus says encouragingly, "Come and see." Then John tells us, "They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day." Here, in a simple and understated way, John gives us the essence of Christian discipleship.

Discipleship is not primarily listening or learning and mastering information; it is not watching a movie or reading the Cliff Notes. It is moving in with Jesus.

Come and see. Jesus invites us to meet him, abide with him, move in with him, remain with him. What we discover over time is that he is always turning toward us and inviting us to come. At first we think we're going to move into Jesus' house, but after awhile we begin to see that his house is our true home and what Jesus is doing is welcoming us home.

That's why we consider the greatest of all of Jesus' parables to be the Parable of the Prodigal Son, where the waiting father runs down the road to welcome the son home. That's the essence of the gospel, the news that is good. We are the son who ran off, the child who is suspicious and afraid but comes home because we're hungry and tired. Instead of facing a slammed door, we are welcomed and loved. Come home. Come and see.

This is the gospel. Paul said, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and has entrusted to us the message of reconciliation" (II Cor. 5:19).

Remember the story of Jacob and Esau way back in the Old Testament? Jacob's whole life had been nothing but one big fight after another. Even before he was born, he and his twin brother Esau fought it out in the womb to see who would be the firstborn. As he grows up he fights with his father, his father-in-law, his brother, his wives, and finally he was facing another big fight with his brother Esau, whom he had long ago defrauded of his birthright and Esau had years of anger to nurse.

The good news was that Esau was coming to meet Jacob. The bad news was that Esau was bringing 400 men with him. Jacob is scared and that night Jacob has

another fight, this time not with a relative but with the Lord God, who wounds him with a blessing so that the next morning he says, “I have seen the face of God and lived.”

The next day he finds himself standing before the brother he had cheated, twenty years of bad blood between them about to hemorrhage. Jacob had prudently divided his big family into two groups so that when Esau attacks one, the other might escape. With uncharacteristic courage, Jacob walks out in front of his retinue to meet his brother. He bows seven times – and for a moment everything comes to a complete halt. There’s a stillness. Then Esau shatters the quiet by charging forward, but instead of running him through with his sword, he grabs Jacob in an embrace. They fall to the ground hugging one another, sort of like a pitcher and his catcher after pitching a perfect game. Jacob offers his brothers gifts to appease him but Esau says, “I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself.” And Jacob, echoing his new relationship with God, replies, “Your face is like the face of God to me.” One night he discovers the face of God. The next morning he recognizes it in his brother.

These kinds of stories tell us who we are and who God is. Everything we know and believe is conditioned by the expectation of reunion and reconciliation. We are reconciled with God, and when we are, we discover that reconciliation in the faces of our sisters and brothers, our neighbors, even those we have considered our enemies. And if we had forgotten this, or perhaps we never really knew it in the first place, then here in our story today is Jesus asking us to come and see, come home with him.

But. And there’s always a “but.” Linguistics scholar Deborah Tannen says that contemporary life in America is the “Argument Culture,” which she says is not

simply about diversity and difference but polarization. She says, for example, that the media has a voracious appetite for violence in all its forms, she adds, “No fight, no news.”

In other words, like Jacob of long ago, we spend our lives in a fight. We live in the presence of our enemies. We’re mad and we’re in conflict with someone or something all the time. Preachers like me are no different from all of you. According to the Alban Institute up to one half of all clergy come from what they call “dysfunctional or traumatically unloving families.” (I like writer Mary Karr’s definition of a dysfunctional family: any family with more than one person in it.)

Loveless relationships and hurt so deeply that you say, “Never again.” Some of us hear the gospel word of forgiveness as conscious or unconscious permission to continue in sin and conflict. Or as Paul says, we “crucify the Son of God afresh.” We are angry and in an argument with each other, with God (if we believe in a god), with ourselves, and with this world around us. Everything’s a fight; everything’s a competition; everything’s a struggle.

And when Jesus invites us to come home, to come and see, in his presence we are shown the truth of it all. When Archbishop Desmond Tutu submitted the final report of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, he said, “Fellow South Africans accept this report as a way, an indispensable way of healing, where we have looked the beast in the eye.” This is what Kierkegaard had in mind when he insisted, “The wound must be kept open in order that the eternal may heal it.”

When we come to Jesus, we are told the truth of the way things are; we look the beast in the eye. When Simon Peter first met Jesus he fell down and cried, “Get away from me! For I am a man with an unclean heart!” This is why we

confess our sins every Sunday in worship. Every Sunday we are brought face to face with the truth of our sin, our conflict, our rage and frustration, our lashing out at others, our failures, and our infidelities both small and great. Our hands are not clean, our hearts are not pure.

Besides the truth of our own lives we confess that Christianity is deeply implicated in the violence of the world. We have to face the truth that throughout history, it is in the name of Jesus and Christian values that Jews were persecuted, tortured, and killed, and Muslims were demonized and killed in the Crusades. It is in the name of Christian values that often legitimate domestic violence, that the church has turned to look the other way when confronted with the ugly truth of sexual abuse, and gays are oppressed in the name of Christ. We continue to sponsor what still is the most segregated hour in American life and we have tied our mission to power politics.

All this is the truth but it is not the whole truth. It is also true that in the presence of Jesus we can begin to be healed, forgiven, reconciled, and made whole. When Jesus invites us home, to come and see, it is the first step. The next step is that we face the beast of our own lives and then the healing begins as another step.

But even as the healing begins it is not easy and it is not perfect. Some of us don't want reconciliation and healing and for many more of us, our healing comes in fits and starts, relapses and recoveries. Yet over time, here and there and now and then, healing and reconciliation happen. In the presence of Jesus and with one another we learn how for Jesus' sake to do ordinary social things differently. We begin to see differently and we begin to act differently. Slowly and over time.

Emily Dickinson wrote, "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant- /... The Truth must dazzle gradually/ Or every man be blind." There are some things, and Truth

is one of them, that can be understood rightly only if we understand them over time. The very essence of Truth is that it can only be known slowly, in bits and pieces that are chewed on, meditated on, reflected over, talked about, practiced and then practiced some more with others living with the same Truth.

As Mother Teresa said, “We can do no great things, only small things with great love.

So in small ways with the great love of Jesus we learn how to make friends across racial lines and listen to one another. We practice the art of gentleness and slow down; we begin to find ways to care for the good earth. We gradually wake up to the fact here in Jesus’ home some of us are gay and some of us are straight; and all of us begin to see not only our calling is to serve those who are in poverty but that it is with them that we will more truly find our home with Jesus.

Gradually, as we come to know the Truth of Jesus Christ, we may be dazzled. Gradually, as we are transformed from people of argument and conflict into people of reconciliation, we are able to see the dazzling brightness of Jesus and his Way of Peace and Shalom for the entire world.

Four years ago, we took a bunch of our youth to a meeting in Dallas to hear Shane Claiborne, a young Christian who is serious about following Jesus and who works with people in poverty in Philadelphia. Part of Shane’s conversion came during a summer with Mother Teresa in Calcutta. He had read about her and heard what she was doing and he was fed up with the standard and conventional Christianity here in the U. S., so yearning to find a real Christian, he picked up the phone and called the Missionaries of Charity in Calcutta. An old raspy voice answered, “Hullo.” He identified himself and said he was looking for the Missionaries of Charity or Mother Teresa. The voice on the other end said, “This

is the Missionaries of Charity. This is Mother Teresa.” He was floored and didn’t know what to say. She was answering the phone. He asked if he could come for a few weeks and work with her and the other Missionaries of Charity. She said, “Come for the summer.” He asked, “Where will I eat and sleep?” She said, “God takes care of the lilies and the sparrows, and God will take care of you. Just come.” And finally he asked, “What’s it like serving in Calcutta?” She replied, “Come and see.”

Austin Heights, in a place where so many want to carry guns we want to say, “Come and see our weapons of the Spirit: love, joy, grace, and peace.” In culture where people fight and heatedly call each other names, we say, “Come and see a people who are known by the love of Jesus Christ, whose words heal, and whose agenda is reconciliation.” And in a place where we so many are alienated, bruised and battered by how hard and mean it is out there, we open the door, open our arms, and say, “Come home.”

Amen and amen.