

Sermon for St. Mark's Episcopal Church  
Rev. David Martin  
Sunday, January 14, 2018  
Gospel Reading: John 1:43-51  
Theme: Come and See

The best way to know if something is good is to check it out: kick the tires, take it for a spin, spend some quality time together. The best way to know if something is worth exploring is to "come and see."

Beethoven's Fifth Symphony is exquisite. But me telling you about it won't convince you of that. You have to listen to it.

The Grand Canyon is a magnificent place of beauty. But I'd have a hard time conveying that to you in words. You have to go see it.

Lemon meringue pie is one of my favorite desserts. But it's difficult to describe why I like it so much. You have to taste it.

Today's gospel is one of my favorite Bible passages. I like it because there is a little bit of humor and a big dose of skepticism – both of which I possess in abundance. But also, in the scripture lesson today, we get some of the best advice one can receive. When Nathanael isn't convinced that Philip has met the Messiah – the promised one about whom Moses and the prophets spoke – Philip doesn't try to convince him of the truth. Instead, Philip simply says, "Come and see."

Come and see.

Nathanael does just that. And upon meeting each other, Jesus immediately recognizes Nathanael as a genuine Israelite; as a person in whom there is no deceit. And he tells Nathanael what he sees in him.

In his commentary on the Gospel of John, William Barclay explains what this meant to Nathanael – a devout man who studied the scriptures. Psalm 32 states "blessed is the man to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit." And Isaiah states that a servant of the Lord "had done no violence and there was no deceit in his mouth."

Nathanael wonders how Jesus knows these things about him. Jesus replies he has seen Nathanael sitting under a fig tree. In reality, this probably isn't such a mystic revelation. Many people sat under fig trees. Such trees give a lot of shade in the hot climate of Israel. But the fig tree was also seen as a symbol of peace. It was common to collect one's thoughts - to pray - under a fig tree in order to find the peace required for contemplation.

So, it isn't the simple fact that Jesus may have spotted Nathanael under a fig tree. Rather, as Barclay states "Nathanael said to himself: 'Here is the man who understands my dreams! Here is the man who knows my prayers! Here is the man who has seen into my intimate and secret longings, longings I have never even dared put into words. This must be God's promised anointed one!'"

Come and see indeed.

I think it is a safe bet to say not many people can be talked into coming to church. You may experience that struggle with family members each and every week. But I'm actually talking about someone who is not a Christian. It would be difficult to debate with an atheist or an agnostic and convince them that the answer to all their questions can be found at church. (Frankly, I'm not sure even I believe ALL my questions can be answered at church.) But I have had conversations with non-churched friends and essentially told them to "come and see."

As a gay man, I have many friends who do not understand my deep connection to the church. Many of my LGBTQ friends have been hurt or ostracized by the Christian faith – misguided in thinking God doesn't love people who aren't heterosexual. They wonder how I can support an institution which allows hate-mongering to any minority.

I tell them to come and see. Come and see the churches where I attend. Come and see how Christians who truly follow the teachings of Jesus behave. I know what being part of a loving, accepting, open and affirming, faith community has done for me. I have seen what it can provide for others.

Come and see.

But what happens when we invite others to "come and see."

We really don't get a lot of snark in the Bible, do we? But today, Nathanael is not impressed when Philip tells him the Messiah hails from the tiny village of Nazareth. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Nathanael snipes. Rivalry between different areas was alive and well back in Biblical times. Nazareth was the epitome of No-where. How could anything good come from there? How could the long-awaited Messiah come from someplace as insignificant and pathetic as Nazareth?

It makes me wonder what people think about St. Mark's. Can anything good come from that church which was deserted and left for dead? Can anything good from a bunch of people who gather each week to question and search and explore together? And turning the mirror inward...

...can anything good come from me?

I am sincere when I ask that question. And I'll bet that many of you sometimes feel the same way.

I'm not perfect. Can anything good come from me? I have questions. I have doubts. I have so many faults. I have made so many mistakes. I argue with my spouse. I yell at my kids. I can't get along with my neighbors.

How can anything good possibly come out of me?

A week ago, at the Golden Globe awards Oprah Winfrey gave a speech while accepting an award for her lifetime of humanitarian efforts. Her speech was widely praised. It was perfectly of the moment. It addressed major issues facing our society today with passion and honesty.

In her speech, Ms. Winfrey said "For too long, women have not been heard or believed if they dare speak the truth to the power of some men. But their time is up. Their time is up. When a new day finally dawns, it will be because of a lot of magnificent women and some pretty phenomenal men, fighting hard to make sure that they become the leaders who takes us to a time when nobody ever has to say "Me too" again."

Indeed, that speech was moving and hit a lot of the right notes we need to hear about seeking and serving Christ in every person we meet and respecting the dignity of every human being.

But is Oprah any better than any one of us here today? No. She is not. Does Oprah have a bigger heart? No, she does not. Does she have a better understanding of humanity? No, she does not. Is she smarter? No, she is not. Oprah is a wonderful philanthropist. But the only thing different between Oprah Winfrey and any of us is the amount of money she has. That money allows her a larger platform from which to speak.

Oprah grew up poor in the projects of Milwaukee with a single mother who worked cleaning other people's houses. I can imagine that at one-time people asked "can anything good come out of the projects of Milwaukee?" Clearly, the answer is "yes."

This week we celebrate the birth of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. King grew up in Atlanta. His father was a Baptist preacher and his mother was a musician. I am certain there was a large number of people in the 1940's who asked "Can anything good come from the family of an African-American Baptist preacher?"

Clearly, the answer is "yes." Today we honor Dr. King as one of the greatest civil rights and social justice activists in our country. He is revered for his stance of non-violence and his powerful speeches. And in our current cultural climate, I think we'd do good to remember his words "The person who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as the person who help perpetrate it. The person who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it." Don't listen to what we've got to say about social justice, instead come and see what we're doing about it.

So, can anything good come out of me? Can anything good come out of you? Yes! Most certainly! Come and see!

In our Old Testament lesson today, God called on young Samuel to be a servant for the Lord. If a child can be called, so can we. And in today's psalm we heard that the Lord knows everything about us. Nothing about us is hidden from God. And we are marvelously made.

God knows our faults. God knows the things we have done wrong. But we are still called to do good works. We are marvelously made. Just as Jesus saw deep into Nathanael's dreams and prayers, Jesus sees our very hearts. He knows we want to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

You and I may not have a television audience of millions of people to listen to us. We do not have an entire civil rights movement hanging on our every word.

But every single morning you and I get out of bed. We say "good morning" to those we love. We venture into the world to work or volunteer or shop or visit others. And every sentence that comes out of our mouths and every action we take is an opportunity to spread the Good News of God's love. It may not be phrased exactly as such. But when you stand against oppression – when you offer a helping hand to someone in need – when you say you disagree with racism and bigotry – whenever you do any of those things by word and deed – you are doing something good.

Something good definitely can come out of each and every one of us – and something DOES come out of us. Something good definitely can come out of St. Mark's – and lots of good things DO come out of St. Mark's.

And that goodness isn't something that we just talk about. It isn't a speech given on television. We invite everyone we encounter to come and see.

Come and see every tiny act of love.

Come and see every big act of resistance against evil and hate.

We can't convince someone of God's love by talking about it. We've got to show people what we mean.

We've got to give them something to come and see.....

....and then we've got to show them something fantastic! Our love of God. Our love of the teaching of Jesus. And our love of one another.

Come and see.