

A SHAKY PROPOSITION

John 1:29-42; Second Sunday in Ordinary time, a
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Prayer: Dear God, we come here looking for hope and meaning, looking for you. As we look, find us in Jesus Christ, and startle us with your truth. Amen.

I have to admit that I don't get these disciples, at least in John's gospel. They're just a bit too ... eager. They drop everything to follow John the Baptist and then drop everything to follow Jesus. They spend just a few hours with him and they are convinced he is the Messiah. Does that sound rational to you?

In Matthew's gospel, people saw the heavens opened up when Jesus was baptized; they heard a voice from heaven. That can be pretty convincing.

In Mark's gospel, Jesus has already healed a number of people before calling the disciples. Word was getting out that this was someone special.

In Luke's gospel, the disciples who were fishing caught an incredible number of fish at Jesus' command.¹

They all give evidence that this Jesus is someone special. They are intrigued. But in John's gospel, the disciples see no miracles, no signs, no healings; they hear no voices from heaven. And the disciples declare they have found the Messiah; just like that! They drop everything and follow him, as though it's no major decision, no big deal, no fundamental changes to make in their life.

So it's hard for me to relate to their eagerness. I don't know of many folks, or *any* folks who just up and leave whatever it is they are doing and follow a rabbi. It takes an incredible amount of discernment to make any kind of commitment, especially one as life-changing as this. People don't just leave their jobs, their families, their hometowns on a whim. Do you see why it's hard to relate for me to relate to John's disciples—over-eager, easy to commit, ready to drop everything and follow?

The only thing that makes sense for me is the possibility that maybe John's disciples have been waiting for just this sort of moment, waiting for a teacher, waiting to follow, waiting for a challenge.

There is some recent scholarship that has moved me in this direction. The Mishna is the first part of the Jewish Oral Law, and it was first written down in the second century of the Common Era. It outlines the normal period of study for young men. The first two periods of study began at age five and continue through age thirteen. The final period of study was reserved for those judged

capable enough to become disciples of a particular rabbi. Some scholars have recently speculated that since at least several of the disciples had begun a trade (such as fishing), they had probably completed the first two periods of study. They were probably older than fourteen but younger than twenty. They had not been chosen by a rabbi to continue their study. They hadn't been chosen by the top rabbis at the top schools. They weren't the top of their class. They weren't the best of the best.

So here comes Jesus and finds some fishermen, people who didn't make the first cut, who didn't get the scholarship to the best rabbinic program, who didn't get selected, of course they're willing to pick up and go. This has been their dream. Of course they're ready to follow. This is their ticket to a different future, instead of the same old same old. With that line of thinking, these disciples look a lot less impulsive, a lot less strange, a lot less weird. Rabbi Jesus is what they have been waiting for.

That makes them seem less weird, but it adds to Jesus' weirdness in my book. If you are looking to establish God's kingdom on earth, you choose the best of the best. You don't go for the rejects.

If you are looking to establish love and justice right here you go to the top schools and choose the top students.

If you are looking to start a revolution of hope and peace you do not start with a couple of simple fishermen who have already been rejected as not smart enough, not capable enough, not good enough.

If you are God-in-the-flesh, the one who gets to choose whoever you want to choose, then you choose the best.²

So it's Jesus who doesn't make any sense here. He chooses the third and fourth tier. He chooses the ones who didn't make the cut. He chooses the weakest of the crowd, the ones voted "Least likely to succeed," least likely to make something great of themselves. Jesus doesn't make any sense at all.

It's because of that that I nearly walked away from the church years ago. The church that our family attended was in many ways very similar to Idlewild. Located in mid-town Richmond; about the same size. The youth group had students from all sorts of high schools. Went through confirmation class (which, you confirmants need to know, wasn't *nearly* as good as what your leaders have planned for you! We had to spend six Sunday evenings with the preacher and memorize The Apostles' Creed).

Well, this was the height of the 1960's, and our youth group wanted to have a Hootenanny in church. (That dates me, to be sure.) Hootenannies were gatherings in which people would just bring their guitars and play and sing radical stuff like Peter, Paul and Mary and the Kingston Trio and we'd bring some friends and have some hot chocolate. We had all the details covered, who would chaperone, who would clean up. We didn't use the word but we thought it would be good

for evangelism. Better to spend Friday evening in church than other options, we thought. So the head of our youth group went to the session meeting with everything thought out, all the possible objections met. He spoke eloquently, especially for a 12th grader, and one of the elders stood up, placed his fist on his hip and simply said, “Boy, you can’t have a hootenanny in this church.” Motion defeated. And Jesus chose *them* to bring in his kingdom? To be his body?

I have to admit that over the years I have seen a lot of things in the church that must give Jesus a headache if not heartburn or maybe even break his heart, even more than not being able to have a hootenanny in church, staying with us, abiding with us in the way he does, all the time. And the world notices that as well. Episcopalians and Presbyterians and Methodists all wound up about ordination issues. Southern Baptists running the finest and most respected of their faculties out of their seminaries in a purge of theological intolerance. The Roman Catholic church plagued by clergy who have not kept their vows of celibacy.

But Kathleen Norris has it right in her book *Amazing Grace* when she writes about the imperfect vessel that the church is. Writing of her own Presbyterian congregation in North Dakota, she says,

We are not individuals who have come together because we are like-minded...we are like most healthy churches, I think, in that we can do pretty well when it comes to loving and serving God, each other and the world; but God help us if we have to agree about things. I could test our “uniformity” by suggesting a major remodeling of the sanctuary, or worse, that Holy of Holies, the church kitchen. But I value my life too much.

She goes on:

The church is like the Incarnation itself, a shaky proposition. It is a human institution, full of ordinary people, sinners like me, who say and do cruel, stupid things. But it is also a divinely inspired institution, full of good purpose, which partakes of a unity far greater than the sum of its parts. That’s why it is called the Body of Christ.

And that is why when the battles rage, people hold on. They find a sufficient unity, and a rubbed raw but sufficient love, and even the presence of God.³

These second and third tiered rejects were called, and for some reason they responded. I think they were tired of a world in which despair trumped hope, and the empire crushed whoever got in its way. They were ready for something new, and not just anything new, but some good news.

When I first thought about this sermon, I was going to respond to the senseless killings in Tucson last week and what the church can do. And in a round about way, I suppose that’s what I’m doing, because this is a sermon about how God can take ordinary, fallible, sinful people like you and me and with the Spirit’s help, make a better world. This is a sermon about the Good News of the saving grace of God as revealed in the person of a first century rabbi, and recognizable in

acts of human kindness done by people of goodwill. “Come and see,” Jesus said to his first disciples. “Come and see.”

Maybe this is actually an evangelism sermon, because evangelism is not merely speaking the good news; it is about living out, just as Jesus did, the justice and compassion of God. I cannot remember a time in my ministry when I have felt a need for the church to be the church, or realize that the Spirit of the living God was indeed alive in the world more than these days.

A man named Philip found a man named Nathaniel and said, “We have found the one that we have been waiting for.”

Nathaniel, understandably skeptical, asked “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” And Philip said “Come and see.”

Can anything good come out of Memphis? Can anything good come out of a congregation worshipping behind a beautiful but forbidding neo-Gothic building? Just come and see. Come and see the power of compassion, the hopeful, can-do attitude, the willingness to praise God even amidst tragedy, because God’s yes is more powerful than death’s no.

Do you know that the entire Christian enterprise would have ended up in the ditch of history if those very first followers of Jesus had kept their mouths shut about their happy discovery? Please note there was no coercion by Jesus or even by his soon-to-be disciples, no doorbell ringing, no pamphlet passing, and no disrespect for others! Just an invitation issued in a broken world where it is so hard to find a reason to have hope when there is so much in humanity: Come and see a community where there is genuine respect for the human dignity of another person. Come and see.

Several years ago I heard a Lutheran bishop say that a study showed that the average Lutheran invites someone to come to church every 24 years. Presbyterians might not be much better, so let me ask: When was the last time you invited someone to come and see, to come and hear a message that God has not forgotten the widow and the orphan, that God needs us to care for the hungry and the sick; and that includes making sure that the mentally ill cannot just walk into a store and buy a Glick semi-automatic.

I don’t know about you, but I can’t do without the faith community these days. I need to have a tangible reminder that divine love, justice and compassion will have the last word in God’s world because this is God’s world.

The cynic would say there is no hope. The atheist would say there is no God. The Christian church would say that while ours is a broken, apparently God-forsaken world, appearances can be deceiving. God has not abandoned creation, but continues to act redemptively within it. And for all our sin, all our failures, all our indifference, all our hard-heartedness, for all of us who have walked by our neighbors in need and said “I’ve got other things to do, there is one coming our way. “Behold the Lamb of God,” John the Baptist said. In other words, we get a fresh start every day!

In our congregational meeting later, we'll deal with some of the business of the church, budgets and committees and "exciting" things like that. During these meetings sometimes its hard to believe that God is actually working through us Presbyterians doing things decently and in order. It's a shaky proposition, isn't it?

But we do that in order that we might more effectively remind the world that there is really only one way to be fully human, only one way to save the world. "Come and see," Jesus said to his disciples long ago. Here and now, he says it again to you and me. "Come and see," the hurt stops here. The hope starts here. My friends, come and see.

And for you confirmands, if you ever want to have a hootenanny, I've got your back.

Amen.

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¹ This was brought to my attention by my friend and colleague Andrew Foster Connors in his sermon "A Teacher's Heart." As a matter of fact, much of the first part of the sermon is indebted to him.

² Ibid.

³ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace*. New York, Riverhead Books. 1998, p. 272-273.