



“See for Yourself”

John 1:35-51

Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones

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Frank Lloyd Wright, the famous architect, told of a lecture he received at the young age of nine that developed his philosophy of life. His no-nonsense uncle took him for a long walk across a snow-covered field. When they reached the other side, his uncle said, “Now, look back at our two sets of tracks. See how your footprints go back and forth from those trees, to the cattle, back to the fence then over there where you were throwing sticks? But notice how my path comes straight across, directly to my goal. You should never forget this lesson!” And Wright never forgot it. He said, “I determined right then not to miss most things in life, as my uncle had.”¹

I suspect that many of us have far too much of that uncle in us. We set out on a goal and become so focused on the finish line that we fail to notice the beauty along the way. Or, worse, we march through life wearing blinders and we miss the surprising alternative paths that hold the promise of a richer life.

All of us establish routines. Routines give life a needed rhythm; but routines turn into ruts if we become blind to fresh options that hold the possibility of more rewarding paths. Our routines can become so cozy that new challenges appear too daunting.

In today’s Scripture passage, Jesus challenges several individuals to break free from their established patterns to try something new. He poses a question that every human being wrestles with many times in life. He asks, “What are you looking for?” Apologies to Miss Penfield for ending a sentence with a preposition, but it is right here in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, so take it up with Jesus!

The question Jesus posed to those first would-be disciples, he extends to each of us. What are *you* looking for? Someone to love and someone to love you? Security – physical, financial and emotional security? What are you looking for? Relief from your misery? A happy life? An end to quarreling and dissension? A purpose big enough to satisfy your hunger? What are you seeking?

Two followers of John the Baptist are yearning for something and they wonder if Jesus can answer the ache in their hearts. They want to know if he possesses the wisdom and guidance they seek. Jesus does not attempt to win them over with a well-reasoned argument or a verbal barrage that blows them away. He simply says, “Come along and see for yourself.”

One of these men was Andrew and we are not sure why, but he was quickly impressed with what he spotted. It was too wonderful to keep to himself, so he recruited his brother, Simon, to join the small faction that was forming. The next day Jesus ran across Philip and enticed him to come on board. Philip responded without hesitation.

In the initial days of his ministry in rural Galilee, Jesus scooped up one loyal disciple after another; but we know it was not always that way. The gospels tell of later encounters where the would-be follower could not make the commitment. Some were too much in love with their wealth; some were too much in love with themselves and others were afraid to buck the status quo.

Today's passage indicates that one of the early disciples was hesitant. Philip seeks out Nathanael and says, "We have found the one about whom Moses and the prophets wrote: Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth."

Nathanael's initial response is not: "Count me in, I'm game! Where is he?" Nathanael's first reaction is cool skepticism. He says, "Nazareth? You've got to be kidding." Nazareth was a poor little village with no history of producing prominent figures, so Nathanael initially resists Philip's invitation. But Philip is a quick study. Taking a tip from Jesus, Philip does not argue with Nathanael or try to twist his arm. He entices him with the same words Jesus used to recruit some of the others. He says, "Come and see for yourself."

Keep in mind, the gospel writers did not simply record history. They wrote of significant episodes in the life of Jesus in a way that invites *us* to step into the story. As he began his ministry, Jesus invited people to become his followers but, in every generation since, Jesus has continued to invite people to follow him.

Some respond with the eagerness of Philip. Perhaps the invitation comes at a ripe moment when they are searching or a desperate time when they will try anything. They jump on board quickly and are rewarded with the ride of a lifetime.

Others balk at the invitation. "I'm pretty busy right now. I'm focused on something else. I have other adventures to pursue." They present a list of excuses to exempt them from taking action.

Keep in mind that God does not knock on our door only once. If you have made a commitment to Christ by joining the church and making a financial commitment, you have already taken significant steps in becoming a faithful disciple. Those steps lead to further opportunities. God is constantly urging us to respond in Christ-like fashion to the people who come our way. How well do you seize those opportunities to comfort a friend who grieves the loss of a loved one? To take a stand for a just cause? To make a generous donation? To be a friend to someone who's lonely?

A cartoon in the *New Yorker* had the following caption: "This morning opportunity knocked at my door, but by the time I pushed back the bolt, turned the two locks, unlatched the chain, and shut off the alarm system it was gone."²

Some construct so many walls of resistance that one chance after another passes them by. Others miss the adventures God has in mind for them because they simply drift through life taking whatever comes, rather than seizing the initiative and making things happen.

Anthony deMello told this parable: A man was walking through the forest one day and he saw a fox that had lost its legs and he wondered how the creature was able to survive. Then he saw a tiger come in with game in his mouth. The tiger ate his fill and then left the rest for the disabled fox. The next day God fed the fox by means of the same tiger. The man who witnessed this began to wonder at God's great goodness and said to himself, "I, too, shall lie down and rest in a corner. I'll put my full trust in God to provide for me all that I need." He did this for many days and nothing happened. He was almost at death's door when he heard a small voice say, "Open your eyes to the truth. Stop imitating the disabled fox and follow the example of the tiger."

God challenges us to live in ways that are richer and truer and more satisfying than we have ever lived. But God does not force us to make certain decisions or compel us to move in specific directions against our will.

God yearns to lead us in the best possible direction given our situation, but God does not override our freedom. So God urges, persuades, coaxes, suggests but does not manipulate, control or force.

Nathanael faced the challenge that each of us faces: to follow Jesus or not. He said, “Yes,” and it made all the difference in his life. When he became a follower, he witnessed Jesus healing people who were not whole. He saw him lift the spirits of people who had been knocked down too many times. He saw him stand firm against greed, corruption and injustice. He saw him revitalize hope in people who had been crushed by life. Nathanael embraced the ways of Jesus and discovered that giving really is more satisfying than receiving, that forgiveness can mend fractured relationships, and that amazing things can happen if we respond with compassion to people in need.

Tom Long remembers the sitting room in his grandparents’ antebellum home in South Carolina. On the wall was a constellation of family portraits – old pictures of his relatives, a genealogy in photographs. In the very middle of the cluster, in the place of honor, was the portrait of someone he did not recognize. It was a sepia-toned, Civil War-era photograph of a striking young man dressed in the uniform of a Union army officer. Needless to say, this was very unusual – the portrait of a Yankee soldier in the place of honor on the wall of a proud South Carolina home. One day, when he was a small child, he asked his grandmother, “Who is that man?”

She said, “I’ll tell you when you’re old enough to understand.”

Years later, she saw Tom in the sitting room one day, gazing at the portrait. She came in, sat down beside him, and finally told the story. She said the man was a chaplain in the Union Army. In May 1862, after the smoke had cleared from the battlefield at Williamsburg, this chaplain rode out on his horse to see if there were any wounded troops who had been left behind. He came across a nineteen-year-old Confederate soldier, lying in a ditch, wounded and terrified.

The boy had taken a bullet that had practically severed his leg and he was slowly bleeding to death. Even though it was the enemy, the chaplain compassionately lifted the boy out of the ditch, put him on his horse, and took him to the Union medical tent, where a surgeon amputated his leg, stopped the bleeding, bandaged him up and saved his life. That was not all. When the boy was strong enough to travel, the chaplain came up with enough money to send the young man home to his grateful parents in South Carolina.

This 19 year-old Confederate soldier grew up to be a minister himself, a teacher, a college president, and, what is most significant to Tom, his great-grandfather.³

None of that would have happened and Tom would not have been born if that Yankee army chaplain had not decided to follow Christ and to *live* the parable of the Good Samaritan.

You’re not likely to ride a horse across a battlefield, but you will have opportunities to pull someone out of a ditch, to help heal someone whose life has been shattered, to make a generous gift and to lift someone’s spirits through an act of kindness.

How rewarding can your life become if you faithfully follow Christ? See for yourself.

NOTES

1. David E. Leininger, *Collected Sermons*.
2. Wiley Stephens, “Patterns, Prisms, and Prisons,” on *Day1.org* February 8, 2004.
3. Tom Long, *Preaching From Memory to Hope*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. ix.