



# Lexington Presbyterian Church

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## Initiative, Community & More

John 1:35-42

A sermon by William M. Klein

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<sup>35</sup>The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, <sup>36</sup>and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" <sup>37</sup>The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. <sup>38</sup>When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" <sup>39</sup>He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. <sup>40</sup>One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. <sup>41</sup>He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed). <sup>42</sup>He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter). (John 1:35-42 NRSV)

1

I was talking to a church member the other day and he said something that may have crossed your mind, too. He said, "You know, the way things are today I hesitate to tell someone I am Christian."

What do you think he meant by that? He did not mean he was not serious about his faith. He did not mean he did not love the Lord. He is one of the most Christian people I know. So...why would he hesitate to self-identify as Christian?

I suspect we all have a pretty good idea why. He doesn't want anyone to think he is like so many people who say they are Christian, all the while spewing hatred and doing some nasty and un-Christian things. Very little from the Sermon on the Mount seems to have rubbed off on them. Their fear-filled words and behavior belie their claim to be disciples of the Lamb of God.

Since we live in a day when too many Christians who make the news seem to be of this single-minded, fearful, hate spewing variety...the church member I was talking with didn't want anyone to think he was of that sort. He was offended by the way a distorted, caricaturish display of Christian faith gives all Christians a bad name. At a deeper level, though, he was dismayed by the way such a distorted, caricaturish display of faith misrepresents his Lord and Savior...by the way it amounts to taking his Lord's name in vain...indeed, by the way it disparages the Christ he knows loves him, accepts him, and every single day gives him life.

Don't worry. The church member I was talking with is not going to give up his faith. In fact, he's going to do everything he can to help people know the loving, inclusive, forgiving, life-giving Lord he has known all these years.

He would never put it this way...but I can. Through this man's life, his words, and his witness people have an opportunity to come and see the Lamb of God at work in him and through him. Through people like this man and through you and me people come to know Christ...or they don't! It means we are always on holy ground in the sense that our words and behavior may draw people to Christ or cause them to run the other way.

1

A lot rides on what we say and do. We should be careful about the way we talk about our Lord...careful about the words we speak...careful about the things we do in his name.

You may know that in the Jewish tradition the name of God (YHWH) is so sacred that it is not spoken. When faithful Jews come across the word "YHWH" in the Bible they say another word...they say, *Adoni*, which means "my Lord." Why do they do this? To help them refrain from taking the Lord's name and presence and purpose for granted...to help them avoid using the Lord's name for irreverent purposes.

2

A number of years ago I read a dairy by a Russian dissident named Tatiana Goricheva. I've mentioned her name and her book any number of times.

She was born and raised in Leningrad (since re-named St. Petersburg) in a land which was constitutionally nonbelieving. A brilliant student, she was the pride of her philosophy faculty at university. But there was a terrible void in her life which was fast taking her down the road so many of her friends had traveled...the road of alcoholism, madness, or suicide. And then, she was turned inside-out by God as God was made know to her through the underground church.

Mind you, Goricheva's experience of church life in the late 1970s and early 80s was quite different from our experience of church life then or now. A major difference was that at that time the church could not have a congregational life in what was then the Soviet Union. Goricheva and others gathered secretly in Leningrad and Moscow to read scripture, talk, and pray together. In their zeal to have others experience what they were experiencing, they were less than discreet...and so most were arrested.<sup>1</sup>

Eventually Goricheva was given the choice of long-term imprisonment or exile. Reluctantly she chose exile in France...where for the first time in her life she attended Sunday morning worship without fear of retribution.

What do you suppose her reaction was? On one level she was overjoyed to be able to worship freely. But on another level she was deeply troubled and surprised by how passionless and indifferent many of the church members appeared to be at morning worship.<sup>2</sup>

For Tatiana Goricheva, talk of the things of God was very costly and precious. In her experience talking about God in Russia was dangerous.<sup>3</sup> What she saw and heard in the "free world," though, made her realize talk of God was even more dangerous...not in the sense of being life-threatening like it was in Russia...but rather, in the sense that the things of God can come to mean nothing.

3

The lesson from John's gospel begins as John the Baptist and his disciples are standing around. Jesus walks by and John points to him and says, "That man is the Lamb of God."

We can't say for sure what John meant by calling Jesus the "Lamb of God." But it meant enough to two of John's disciples that they walked off after Jesus. One of the two was Andrew who would become one of Jesus' 12 disciples. The other is unnamed...but is thought to have been John the Gospel writer.

2

There is a lot that is not said in this passage. We are told that when Jesus realized the two men were following him he said, "What are you looking for?" Their response doesn't seem like an answer to his question, does it? They replied, "Teacher, where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and see."

It's the sort of thing Jesus said in one way or other more than once. "Come and see." It was as if to say, "Come and see and judge for yourself who you think I am...and what you think I am about."

Missouri is known as the "show me state." I'm not saying people from Missouri are stubborn...nor am I saying they are not. But I think it's safe to say they want to see the evidence. Seeing is believing.

Thinking back to the church member I had a conversation with the other day...over and over again he has "shown me" by his example, by his words, by his behavior that he is the real deal. Jesus is his Lord. It may sound fanciful...and it would certainly sound fanciful to him...but he helps me find out who Jesus really is.

His example reminds me that your faith and mine is meant to be incarnational. What we say and do is meant to remind people of Jesus. Our faith calls on us to incarnate Christ in our own selves.<sup>4</sup> It calls on us to point people to God...to help them love God with all their heart and strength and to love one another.

That is precisely what John the Baptist did when he looked at Jesus and said to his disciples, "That man is the Lamb of God." John was pointing the way so others could recognize and follow the Christ.

Last Sunday I mentioned Roger Nishioka, Professor of Christian Education at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, GA. In his words about the passage before us today Nishioka helps us understand the importance of John the Baptist's example. What I mean is this. John was not neurotically pointing to himself or doing his best to make sure his disciples stayed with him. John was pointing his followers to Jesus. In John 3:30, John the Baptist says, "(Jesus) must increase, while I must decrease." He knew he was not the Messiah. His job was to be a pointer...to direct, to guide, to point people to God.

Nishioka says we should all seek to be as Christ-like as we can. We should incarnate Christ in our own selves. He makes his point powerfully by citing the words of Teresa of Ávila (a Spanish Carmelite nun and mystic who lived in the 1500s). She wrote: "Christ has no body now, but yours. No hands, no feet on earth, but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ looks compassion into the world. Yours are the feet with which Christ walks to do good. Yours are the hands with which Christ blesses the world."

Teresa's insight is certainly challenging because she was right. She gave us words to live by.

But we also need to remember Jesus alone was and is Jesus. Jesus alone was and is the Messiah. We are not. That may seem obvious...but listen to how Nishioka came to that awareness.

He tells about being invited by a faculty colleague to have lunch. He had been so busy trying to be available to every student, trying to be everything to everybody. He was dragging. When he sat down at the lunch table he asked his colleague what was going on. His friend said she had some good news for him. Nishioka asked what the good news

was. She smiled and said, "I want you to know the Messiah has come!" Nishioka was thoroughly confused...until she went on to say, "And you are not the Messiah."

In that moment he realized the real danger in a distorted incarnational theology is that we come to believe that if the world is going to be saved, we have to do it.<sup>5</sup> Nishioka had forgotten his job was not to be the Savior, but to point to the Savior. His friend's reminder of his proper role lightened the load he had been carrying.

4

Returning to the passage from John's Gospel...it seems Andrew liked what he saw and heard when he followed Jesus. He liked it so much he fetched his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah." He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "Your given name may be Simon...I am going to call you Peter, the Rock."

You and I know enough about Simon Peter to know Jesus didn't give him that name because he was already a Rock. Jesus gave him this name because he believed that in time he could become the Rock upon which the future church would be built.

This new name Jesus gave Simon reminds me that the church member I had a conversation with the other day, you, and I truly are "Christian in order to become Christian."<sup>6</sup>

Here is what I mean by that. Someone or something points us to Jesus...perhaps our parents, perhaps friends, perhaps something we read. At some level we hear Jesus say, "Come and see for yourself," and, as did Andrew, we like what we see and hear and choose to follow him. We take the first steps of thinking and behaving and being Christian. We become Christian in order to become Christian more and more each day.

May we keep taking steps to be and become those people through whom others find reason to follow Jesus. Amen.



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### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Craig, Mary. 1985. *Six Modern Martyrs*. NY: Crossroad Pub., 252.

<sup>2</sup> Goricheva, Tatiana M. 1988. *Talking About God Is Dangerous*. NY: Crossroad Pub., 96.

<sup>3</sup> Goricheva, 91.

<sup>4</sup> Bartlett, David L. & Taylor, Barbara Brown, ed. 2010. *Feasting on the Word*. Year A, Vol. 1. Louisville: WJK Press, 260.

<sup>5</sup> Bartlett & Taylor, 264.

<sup>6</sup> Karl Rahner coined this phrase.