



Come and See!

TEXT
John 4:27–29. 39–42

July 29, 2018 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Y. Nishioka

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you want?” or, “Why are you speaking with her?” Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.” So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”

Little Five Points is a neighborhood due east of downtown Atlanta. Five streets come together there, hence its name. It has emerged as kind of an artsy, hipster neighborhood. There are popular restaurants with all kinds of fusion type foods. It was the first place in Atlanta where warehouses were converted to lofts. Atlanta’s first microbreweries

appeared there. There are tattoo parlors and all kinds of shops.

I was meeting some friends there for lunch and arrived early. So, I walked around waiting for them and was just looking in some of the stores. I stopped to look around one store and discovered it was a jewelry store of sorts. There were display cases of rings and gemstones and crystals. There was a young woman with bright-colored greenish purple hair and multiple piercings helping another young woman at the counter. The young woman said she was looking for a necklace with a cross. I was curious. So, I paused and listened. The clerk pointed out where the crosses were, and then she asked the customer, “Did you want a plain one or one with a little man on it?” A plain one or one with a little man on it. It took every ounce of restraint in me not to interrupt and say, “Excuse me? That little man? He is our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, thank you very much!” But the Holy Spirit took hold of me, and I took a breath and then leaned over and said as calmly as possible, “Excuse me. I do not mean to be rude, but that little man . . . that’s actually Jesus Christ.” The clerk looked at me, shrugged her shoulders and said, “Okay. Whatever.”

That is a very different response from the woman about whom we just read in John’s gospel. Jesus and his disciples are traveling from Jerusalem back home to Galilee. They travel through Samaria and stop at a well there. The disciples leave Jesus to go and buy some food. A Samaritan woman comes to the well, and Jesus asks her to give him some water. The woman is surprised because first, Jews and Samaritans hate one another, and second, men do not talk to women unless they are related to them by birth or by blood.

In the conversation, Jesus offers her living water. Intrigued, she asks for this water so she may never be thirsty again. Then Jesus tells her to go call her husband. She answers that she has no husband. Jesus tells her that she has had five husbands, and the man she is with now is not her husband. She is startled and as they talk further, she comes to believe that Jesus is the Messiah.

Then she does something extraordinary. So moved by this encounter with Jesus, she runs back to her village and invites them to come and see Jesus. She speaks to any and all saying, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” The Bible

says many came to believe that Jesus was the Messiah because of her testimony, and many more believed when they themselves met Jesus.

That experience in the jewelry store in Little Five Points was important for me because, as a seminary professor, it was far too easy for me to exist in my little Christian bubble, thinking that pretty much everyone knew who Jesus Christ was and that those who did not recognize him as Lord and Savior were choosing that. It was then that I realized I was wrong. For many people, they do not dislike the church. Oh, I know, some do. Sadly, too many have been hurt by the church. But for many people, they do not hate us. They just don't think we matter. In some ways, that seems even worse than disliking us.

The Pew Forum on Religion and the Public Life reports that the fastest growing religious group in the United States is the religiously unaffiliated. These are adults who, when asked for their religious affiliation — Roman Catholic, Protestant, non-denominational, other faith, etc. — responded “none” or no religious affiliation. What is interesting is the vast majority of them say they are spiritual. They believe in God. They just don't think it is important to be here, in church. The Pew Forum says that today, one in four adults are religiously unaffiliated. They are the “spiritual but not religious.” One in four American adults.

But here is the problem: I am convinced you cannot be a truly spiritual person on your own.

You certainly cannot be a true follower of Jesus Christ on your own. Your faith in Jesus Christ is personal, but it is not private. If it were private, we would not have to do this. We would not have to gather at Village on Antioch or at Village on Mission. We could stay at home like normal people and worship at St. Mattress. But no, we have to get up and come here because you cannot be a Christian on your own — because we need one another to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ. In times of joy and in times of sadness, even in routine times, we gather together to worship God because we cannot walk this Christian journey by ourselves. But there is something so odd about us, that even though we believe this, we are reluctant to invite others to come be part of the community of faith. Even though I believe that, even though I know it to be true, I am still reluctant to invite others to come be a part of the community of faith.

Several years ago, I was on a plane going to preach and lecture in Roanoke, Virginia. I was to speak that evening, and I had not yet finished my lecture, so I was working on it on the plane. By the grace of God, the seat next to me was empty, so I was able to spread out my Bible and notes and laptop. The flight attendant came by, and I asked for my usual: Fresca and pretzels. When she set it down on the tray for me, I thanked her. Then, as is my practice, I closed my eyes and bowed my head and said a brief prayer of thanks just to myself. “Thank you, God, for Fresca and pretzels, and please bless those

this day who do not have Fresca and pretzels.”

A woman whom I had not yet noticed was sitting across the aisle from me. She was an older adult, so by now should have learned to use her inside voice. She said, “What were you doing?” I was startled.

“I'm sorry?” I said.

“What were you doing? Just then,” she asked again.

“I ate some pretzels and drank some Fresca,” I replied.

“No, before that. What did you do?” she asked.

“I don't know,” I answered perplexed.

“Were you praying?” she asked.

“Oh, um ... well, yes,” I answered.

“For fresca and pretzels?” she asked.

“Uh, yes. I always pray before I eat anything,” I answered.

“So you are a prayer,” she confirmed.

“I guess,” I said, a little unsure.

“Well, since you are a prayer, I would like to you to pray for my sister,” she said.

“Okay,” I replied.

“You know, I'm going to Roanoke,” she said.

“Well, we all are,” I replied.

“Her name is Betty. And she has the cancer again. She is my last surviving sister,” she said.

“I'm so sorry,” I replied.

“She is married to Tom,” she continued. “Never liked him.”

“Well,” I said, “I would be honored to pray for Betty and for Tom.”

“I'm thinking right now,” she said.

“Well, you know we’re getting ready to land,” I said.

“Well, you don’t have to pray long,” she said. “Just pray!”

I took a breath. “Well, okay. But when I pray with someone, I like to hold their hand. May I hold your hand?” I asked.

“That would be fine,” she said as she put out her hand. So I took her hand across the aisle and prayed out loud for Betty and Tom. I found out as we were landing that her name was Denise, and she lived in Jacksonville. I was glad because, honestly, I was afraid that if she lived in Atlanta, she was going to stalk me.

We landed, and when I got to baggage claim, I met my ride, the senior pastor of the Presbyterian Church where I was preaching and speaking. As were greeting one another, Denise caught up to me and pointed out Betty, who was sitting in a wheelchair with a man behind her whom I later found out was Tom. Denise grabbed my arm and said, “Look, there they are. My Betty and, well, Tom. Hey, come over here.”

Then she spoke to the pastor, George, and said, “Hey, are you a prayer too?”

George looked confused, and I said to him, “Just say yes.”

He told Denise he was, and then she said, “Okay, good. Why don’t we do it again since now we have two prayers.” We gathered together, and Denise said, “We’re supposed to hold hands.” So there in the middle of baggage claim, the five of us held hands and prayed for Betty. Then we all departed.

I lectured that night and twice on Saturday. Sunday morning, I

was in the chancel for the first service. I was sitting next to George, and he nudged me and pointed to the very back pew. There was Denise and Betty and Tom. Denise waved to me. They did not linger to speak to me. But I found out later that George visited Betty and Tom and invited them to join the church. They did. George said it was an honor to accompany Betty in her dying and Tom in his grieving. Tom is still active in the church. He seems to be a good guy.

That Sunday afternoon after preaching, one of the elders dropped me off at the Roanoke airport, and as I was walking through the airport, it hit me. I never invited them to come to worship. I prayed with them and for them, but it never occurred me to invite them to come to church. Perhaps because I did not want to intrude or I was afraid to be “one of those Christians” who accost people. Denise, Betty and Tom came to the church because when they met George at the airport, he said he was the pastor there and they remembered.

Later, when he visited Betty and Tom, George invited them to join and they did. But I never invited them! When I boarded the flight back to Atlanta, I sat next to a young man and greeted him. Across the aisle from me was a woman, and I greeted her. As I sat there, I could feel God’s annoyance with me. I could hear God’s disappointed voice saying, “I sat her across the aisle from you. She told you about Betty. You prayed with Denise, then you prayed with Betty and Tom. Why didn’t you ask them if they

had a church home? What is wrong with you?”

At Village Church, the first expectation in our new strategic framework is that we would be an inviting people. That we are not going to just wait for people to come to us. We are going to invite them. This does not mean we are going to accost others or shame them or guilt them, but we are going to invite them. It may mean you invite someone to worship or to a class or to your women’s circle or to the sewing group or to a concert or to help at the Food Pantry. The point is, we are no longer content to sit back passively and wait for persons to come to us.

Would you like a plain one or a one with a little man on it? It is clear to me. We do not live in a Christian bubble nor should we. There are children and young people and young adults and adults around us who are yearning to encounter a community of believers who invite them and love them in Jesus’ name.

“Come and see! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” Yes. Yes, he is. He is Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. Come and see!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.