

“How Do You Know Me?”

John 1:43-51

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For the third week in a row, we return to what has become a familiar scene because there we are confronted with the third of the great questions to be found in this particular passage. Philip has by now seen and heard enough of Jesus to be convinced that he WAS the long-awaited Messiah, the one they had been looking for. So in great excitement, he tracks down his close friend Nathaniel to share with him the good news. To satisfy his OWN curiosity, Nathaniel decides to accompany him back to meet Jesus that he might judge for himself. When Jesus sees him coming, he declares, “Behold an Israelite indeed in whom there is no guile!” Wondering how this man whom he had never met before can claim to know him and his heart, Nathaniel asks, “HOW do you know me?” Jesus replies, “I saw you when you were under the fig tree.” Thus when Nathaniel seeks Jesus out in order to satisfy his curiosity about him, he discovers that instead of finding JESUS, Jesus had already found HIM! He had seen him sometime earlier under the fig tree and what he saw had convinced him that Nathaniel was truly a man in whom there was no guile; there was no deceit or treachery about him or in his character. This causes Nathaniel to exclaim, “Teacher, you really ARE the Son of God, the King of Israel!”

Back in the mid-70’s, there was a popular evangelistic campaign launched by Campus Crusade for Christ called “I Found It.” It seemed everywhere you went, you saw bumper stickers on the backs of cars proclaiming that they had “found it.” This was to provoke people to then ask, “found WHAT?” which, in turn, would create an opening for the driver to share how he had discovered Jesus Christ and how they could find him TOO. I don’t know how effective it was although THEY claimed that three and a half million persons came to Christ as a result of it. I DO know that it spawned its share of spoofs with bumper stickers then appearing declaring “I Lost It” and “I Don’t Want It.” MY problem with the whole campaign was that it fostered the notion that WE somehow find God, that God is out there just waiting for US to make the first move so he can respond by then coming into our hearts. Furthermore, it suggests that if it is left up to each of us to have to “find” God, then it is also up to us to keep from “losing” him as well.

One of the biggest misunderstandings concerning our faith is that of thinking that WE can “find” God, that we have the foresight or wisdom or good sense to realize that we need Christ in our life, AFTER ALL. It is the height of vanity to believe that we just happened to wake up one morning with the sudden realization of how spiritually impoverished we are, and that only Jesus holds all the answers to life’s problems. Therefore, we need to begin making room for him somewhere in our life. But nothing could be FURTHER from the truth! Yes, it all begins with an encounter, that is, when Christ first approaches us and extends to us the offer to follow HIM, but it is Jesus himself who always takes the initiative, who seeks us out, who essentially “finds US” rather than we find HIM. All WE can do is decide whether to follow him or not.

What distinguishes Christianity from all the other religions in the world is that where theirs is essentially based upon “man’s search for GOD,” Christianity is just the OPPOSITE- it is about “God’s search for MAN.” In chapters fifteen, John quotes Jesus as telling his followers: “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go forth and bear much fruit...” In other words, those disciples didn’t just walk into a Presbyterian church one day

when Jesus happened to be preaching and right then and there make the decision to trust him with the rest of their lives- NO, it was Jesus who chose THEM. He spied and sought THEM OUT long before they had ever set eyes on him, and as a result of that encounter, he said to them, "You now belong to me and your lives are never again going to be same."

I can't repeat enough just how important the truism is, that WE never find Christ- instead, Christ always finds US, and when he DOES, he is RELENTLESS about it; he promises he will NEVER let us go! Certainly, there is a hunger created deep within each of us that was instilled by God and WHICH ONLY GOD HIMSELF can fill. And many persons, myself included, have embarked on a long journey trying to find what it is that will plug that hole, that will help assuage that gnawing un-ease that exists deep within each of us. We look for God in the books of the world's greatest philosophers and experiment with different religions. We get lost in all forms of sensuality supposing that will provide us with the peace and fulfillment we yearn for. In Judith Rossner's bestseller *Looking For Mr. Goodbar*, later adapted into a movie starring Diane Keaton, Theresa Dunn is a young single Irish-American school teacher in New York City who spends her days teaching first grade to a classroom of deaf-mutes and her nights, making herself available in singles bars. In her desperate search for love, her deep loneliness and lack of self-esteem compel her to engage in an endless series of one-night stands with complete strangers--often older men--who use her for nothing but sex. Then one night, she takes home a lover who in a fit of rage, stabs her to death. The world is FULL of Theresa Dunns, both male AND female, endlessly looking for a Mr. (or Mrs.) Goodbar to assuage their innermost emptiness only to find themselves disappointed again and again- a futile gesture which makes that hole in their soul grow EVEN WIDER AND DEEPER.

Many times, we convince ourselves that after all our diligent searching we've at last discovered the answer, that we have finally found God or "the Truth" or whatever it is we want to call it. But such gods are usually imposters, that is, gods created in our OWN image, gods who agree with our own opinions, gods who make little or no demands upon us. Such gods do not and CANNOT save nor can they offer us the serenity and peace of mind we so desperately long for. On the other hand, the God who would seek US out and find US is an entirely DIFFERENT divinity, one who makes ULTIMATE demands on us. Jesus said, "If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" or as the great German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it, "When Christ calls a person, he bids him come and die!" He calls each of us every day to die to ourselves, to die to our own wills, to put to death our selfish personal desires when it conflicts with God's desires for us. It is to deny ourselves for the cause of Christ and thus turn away from the idolatry of self-centeredness that drives and consumes us. Only after we have begun subordinating our own will and desires in the interests of others will we then learn to give of ourselves selflessly and to love self-sacrificially. Only as our pride and selfishness die within will we ever begin to see the needs of others more clearly. THIS is the life to which we have been called- to love one another as Christ loved us, and to even LAY DOWN our lives on behalf of one another as Christ did for us. Any religion that would ask anything LESS of us can hardly ever be called "Christian," such is the difference between the gods WE seek and find, and the God who seeks and finds US!

The 19th century English poet Francis Thompson expressed God's search for man most powerfully and eloquently in his great poem, "The Hound of Heaven." In it, he portrays God as a large dog who never stops chasing us, who refuses to give up on us regardless of how far or how fast we may run, so GREAT is God's love for us. It begins:

*I fled Him down the nights and down the days
I fled Him down the arches of the years
I fled Him down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind, and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.
Up vistaed hopes I sped and shot precipitated
Adown titanic glooms of chasm-ed fears
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.*

For Thompson, the speaker is running from God, trying to evade both his presence and his call upon his life to follow him--as do many people caught up in the world--only to realize how futile it ultimately is. Although aware of God's love for him, the speaker CONTINUES to run, believing that submitting to God means giving up worldly pleasures. But God is undeterred- he STILL pursues him, saying, "Rise, clasp My hand, and come!" The speaker wonders whether the gloom he feels is nothing more than the shade cast by the hand of God reaching out to him. God tells him that the happiness he sought by running away was following him the entire time. This is the TRUE condition of the human heart, that we would run and run and NEVER STOP running from God at every opportunity, placing every obstacle we can in the way of a deep and meaningful relationship with him were it not for his persistent love for us, his refusal to ever give up on us. That, my friends, is what "GRACE" is all about.

One of the most popular Christian theologians of the 20th century was John R.W. Stott. In 2005, *Time* magazine hailed him as one of the 100 most influential persons in the world. In his book *Why I Am a Christian*, he labels the first chapter "The Hound of Heaven" and goes on to confess that he became a Christian, not because of the influence of his parents and teachers, nor to his own personal decision, but to being relentlessly pursued by "the Hound of Heaven," that is, Jesus Christ himself, who refused to give up on him even when there were times he wanted to give up on himself.

But eventually we tire and get worn down from the chase; we realize we can never outrun Christ. As we stand before him, we do so completely exposed- there is nothing that he doesn't already know about us, nothing that can remain hidden from his sight. And yet, in SPITE of what he sees- he doesn't reject us, doesn't express disgust and exclaim what an error in judgment he's made. Instead, he opens his arms up wide and bids us to come, to join him along with the rest of his immediate family- the Church. He accepts US just as we are- dirty, selfish, greedy, proud, and full of addictions. He loves us, forgives us, and desires to break the chain of old habits and illicit desires that have bound us for years, even when our hearts are far from him and our lives are filled with all sorts of hardness and rejection. Such love and forgiveness can never be earned or worked for or even improved upon- we can only RECEIVE it as freely as it has been OFFERED. And if we DO step out in faith and believe that through Christ, we are TRULY forgiven and are now reconciled to God--made members of his own family--we will then begin to see new life replace the old- each of us transformed by the mercy of God, by a reality we did not create or even ask for. The fact is that God's activity on our behalf and in our lives begins and ends with God ALWAYS taking the first step and with US doing nothing more than accepting it and responding with love and gratitude for it. It's always about GOD'S INITIATIVE and GOD'S EFFORTS and NEVER our own. And when we discover this truth, when we learn how unyielding and unconditional this love for us actually IS, then we--just as a

disciple named Nathaniel did many years ago--can do nothing else BUT fall down before him and exclaim, "Jesus, truly you ARE the Son of God, the King of Israel!"

I'd like to close by taking you back to the summer of 1975 in New York City, during one of the most difficult periods of my life. My father had died only three months before and I had returned to New Jersey from college in California to spend the summer with my grieving mother. The vice-president of Dry Dock Savings Bank in Manhattan knew my father and graciously offered me a job for the summer, which I took him up on. Thus each day I would catch the train into the city and walk the two blocks from Penn Station to Greeley Square where I would then ride the uptown subway to the bank on Lexington Ave and 59th St. However, each day, I also couldn't help but notice a small granite drinking fountain next to the subway entrance that seemed old and neglected and gave every impression that it didn't work anymore. What drew my attention to it in the FIRST place was not the fountain itself as New York is full of such fountains, but the inscription on its pedestal. It read, "Dedicated to the Memory of Jerry McAuley." And then beneath it was this quote from Revelation 21, "I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely." Throughout that summer, every time I walked past it, I'd think about that inscription and wonder who Jerry McAuley was. Was he a child who had been run over by a streetcar in the early part of the 20th century and his parents donated this fountain as a memorial to him? Was he a former politician or beloved minister in the city? I just didn't know. Still, for some inexplicable reason, a day didn't go by without pausing in front of that fountain to reflect on that name and the dedication just below it.

When the summer had ended, I drove back to California but instead of going directly to my school in Santa Cruz, I headed for Chico, about three hours to the north, where I had a four-month long internship at a large church waiting for me. I would become "Pastor Dave" during that time- preaching sermons, leading Bible studies, conducting prayer meetings, and doing all sorts of visitation under the guidance of the pastor there. I had been a Christian little more than two years and knew that I'd be completely over my head. After all, what did I really know about God and church and pastoral ministry after only a few short years. No way was I prepared for the responsibilities I was about to assume.

During those months, I lived with the assistant minister and his family. He was a good friend who tried to mentor me as much as he could. Late in the evening after everyone else had gone to bed, I would often quietly sneak out of the house and walk out into the middle of the large rice field located directly across the street. There, I would lay down on my back for upwards of an hour, peering up into the clear night sky and talk to God. I would share with him my deepening sense of inadequacy and uncertainty about being there, wondering if I even HAD been called into ministry in the first place. Above all, I pondered how I was going to get through my internship without looking like a complete incompetent. Gazing up into the night sky, I would imagine Jesus coming back, leading a great horde of angels as he had promised to do in the Last Days. In a way, that field served as my OWN FIG TREE, my personal prayer closet, a place where I could draw close to Christ and share with him my JOYS, but ESPECIALLY my FEARS and my FRUSTRATIONS.

After I had been in Chico for several weeks, one afternoon I drove over to the university--Chico State--to do some research in their library for a particular project I was working on. After about three hours of reading and writing, it was time for me to head home and join my host family for dinner. I packed up my briefcase and as I was getting ready to leave, I noticed down

the long aisle of bookshelves that about thirty feet away, there was a single book hanging on the edge of the shelf, almost in danger of falling onto the floor. Without giving a thought to it, I walked down the long row of stacks to push it back in. As I placed my hand on the volume, I happened to glance at the name on that book- it was entitled *The Life of Jerry McAuley*. A shock went through my body, "Not THE Jerry McAuley!" I thought to myself. Excitedly, I took the book out and sat down on the floor to look through it. When I opened up the cover, there was a picture on the very first page of a granite fountain with the inscription, "Dedicated to the Memory of Jerry McAuley" and beneath it the words, "I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely." It was MY fountain, the same one I had encountered almost every day that summer on my way to the bank. I'm not ashamed to say that tears filled my eyes as I read, finally discovering who this mysterious figure was AFTER all.

It turns out that he was an Irishman who by the mid-1800's arrived in the slums of New York because his own family didn't want him. By his own admission, he was a "rogue and a street thief." At the age of 19, he was falsely accused of highway robbery, convicted on trumped-up charges, and sent to Sing Sing prison for 15 years. After five years in prison, something happened which would change his life. During a Sunday chapel service, he heard a man whom he had gotten in much trouble with over the years testify of his conversion to Christ. Jerry was moved to tears by his testimony and since he knew the man well, he knew his testimony was genuine. The impact of his friend's story started him on a search through the Bible for answers. After a prolonged struggle with God, he stopped fighting him and turned his life over to him. Overwhelmed with such a profound sense of God's love and mercy, all he could do was shout, "Praise God! Praise God!" From that moment on, he knew that his life would never again be the same.

A few years later, he was pardoned and set free. Returning to New York, God moved upon his heart to open up a mission to persons who were just like himself, and for the next twelve years, the tender love and acceptance he showed to the down and out won over thousands of souls. When he died in 1884 at the age of 45, it seemed as if all of New York came to pay their respects to the man who opened the first rescue mission for the people of the slums. As a memorial to him, the people of that city contributed money for the erection of that granite fountain in Greeley Square that he and his example of caring might never be forgotten. Today, that mission is STILL in operation and lives continue to be transformed there as a result of the ministry Jerry McAuley first started.

Friends, it was no coincidence that I happened to be in that library that afternoon and as I was preparing to leave, noticed AMONG THE MILLIONS OF VOLUMES THERE one lone book sticking out of the stacks, or that I suddenly and inexplicably felt the need to get up from out of my seat and walk down that long row of books to push it back in. You see, luck or fate or anything ELSE you might want to call it had nothing to do with it; God INTENDED for me to find that book. And by revealing to me the answer to a question which for months had intrigued me, in a city some three thousand miles away, it was God's way of saying, "David, just as I saw Nathaniel under that fig tree many years ago, I saw YOU and was WITH you all summer long as you passed by that fountain in New York City. Several months later and some three thousand miles away, I CONTINUE to be with you- RIGHT HERE, RIGHT NOW! But I not only SEE you, David, I KNOW you. I know your heart and your faith; I've heard your questions and even your misgivings about ministry itself, and I want you to know that you are PRECISELY where I want you to be, doing EXACTLY what I called you to do in the FIRST place." In other words,

God was validating my call to ministry just as he had Nathaniel's, and SINCE that day, I have never ONCE distrusted his guidance or doubted my calling.

The bottom line is that this is not only NATHANIEL'S story, it is as much our OWN story AS WELL- both yours AND mine! Long before we ever knew who Jesus was, he ALREADY saw and knew who each of US were. And discerning OUR heart and assessing OUR character along with our many failures and glaring inadequacies, he STILL chose us to join him in the GRANDEST ADVENTURE OF THEM ALL- his mission to transform the world by the simple sharing of his love. And I find that the more we APPRECIATE this high honor as well as the tremendous responsibility that comes with it, and continue to CHERISH his abiding presence in our lives and the unconditional love he has for us, then we can't help BUT fall down--just as NATHANIEL did--and proclaim, "Jesus, truly you ARE the Son of God, the King of Israel!" Let us pray...

Dear God, you are ever close to us- closer than our hands or feet, closer than our breathing. You are the God who has promised to never leave or forsake us, who will stand beside us in our times of bewilderment, in our times of despondency, and in our times of panic. Place our feet on solid ground and help us to believe that you will lead us each day. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.