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Church of the Redeemer UMC

### “Come and See”

Everything that Christ calls us into is about relationships. We are called to be in relationship with God, to accept love that is given freely and to freely act with love toward others. We are commissioned to build relationships with others, tell them our story, and help them explore their own. No matter your theology, there’s a common understanding that when we sin we are separated from God—hence the need for repentance and reconciliation. In today’s Scripture, we see two pictures of relationship: strong, established relationships founded in deep trust and respect between John and his disciples; and the birth of a relationship between Jesus and those very disciples. In the first part of the passage, we read John’s words *really* talking up Jesus. There’s no misunderstanding his feelings. So if we played out this scene today, John and his disciples would be standing on some street corner and as Jesus walks by he’d throw them an elbow: “Hey fellas, that’s the guy I was telling you about!” And they would surely scramble to place themselves in his path.

What’s interesting is that when they do call Jesus over, and ask him where he’s staying, he doesn’t just point down the road and say, “Oh, five houses down on the left.” He understands the question beneath their question, the curiosity and the desire to get to know him, and instead he issues an invitation: “Come and see.” Instead of a momentary encounter on the road, they end up spending the day with Jesus—such a powerful experience for them that Andrew actually leaves, finds his brother Simon, and tells *him* to come and see! They have found Messiah. Jesus gives Simon the name Cephas, or Peter, thus setting in motion the very institution of the church that allows us to sit here and talk about him today. By inviting them in, Jesus was taking the time to *show* them real answers in a way that allowed the men to decide for themselves whether this was indeed the Messiah. He didn’t blow off their curiosity, nor did he bombard them with a sales pitch like a kiosk worker at the mall. In this passage, he doesn’t even ask them to stay and be his disciples; he invites them into relationship and gives them all the space they need to close the gap.

Yesterday I had the grand adventure of waking up at 4:15 in the morning and leaving my house at 5:00 to make the 392 mile drive to Arlington Heights, a southwestern suburb of Chicago, for the Winter Warming 2017 hosted by the Northern Illinois Reconciling Ministries Task Force. I was excited for extremely personal reasons to go—Bishop Karen Oliveto gave the sermon, and I would finally get to meet Bishop Sally—but I also wanted to go and see what this other, larger conference with a much larger number of Reconciling congregations was doing to live out the social gospel. The social gospel, or social holiness, calls us into places of darkness and corruption to name what we see and to actively resist it. Bishop Karen shared that in her ministry, specifically during her time in the Mountain Sky Area before becoming Bishop, she has worked from

the margins toward the center. When I read the Gospels I read about a Jesus who did just that. That's a Jesus I want to follow. During my all-too-brief time with our spiritual siblings in Northern Illinois, we talked about the need for our church and for groups like Reconciling Ministries Network and Methodists for Social Action to name the harms plaguing our society, challenge our leadership to make meaningful changes in how we serve all of God's children, and press our secular elected officials to do the same. Most importantly, we have to be willing to do the work in our congregations—with this small but mighty group of people—to make earth as it is in heaven.

In his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. also invited others to "come and see". He addressed his letter to Southern clergymen, most of whom were white, who questioned and criticized his very presence in Birmingham at the height of his Civil Rights activism. He wrote:

But more basically, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their "thus saith the Lord" far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.

Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outside agitator" idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.<sup>1</sup>

He answered the call to come and see the injustice in Birmingham, and like Andrew going to Simon he implored others to join him. As Jesus did, Dr. King went beyond simply answering questions and instead extended the invitation to see not only the challenges, but also the ways that he and others were responding to them. Then, they too could decide for themselves whether to stay and join the fight.

I share all of this with you today not only because we're celebrating Dr. King's legacy, and not only because I'm so fired up from my trip yesterday. I share this with you because we are talking about how to tell our Jesus stories to others, and when we talk about *why* we follow Jesus it's important to remember that he was and is about so much more than creeds and hymns and confessions of sin and personal piety. Following Jesus means all of those things, yes, but I'll tell you what: it wasn't until I understood that following Christ was synonymous with standing against injustice that I finally accepted his claim on my heart. In sharing our witness with others, we may often contend with a limited vision of God that's peddled in too many churches today. Let's call that figure "AC God." AC God is only worried about whether you tithe, attend church every Sunday, and engage in acts of personal piety. AC God makes bad things happen to people because they didn't pray

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," University of Pennsylvania African Studies Center, [https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles\\_Gen/Letter\\_Birmingham.html](https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html).

enough, work enough, or because they themselves are somehow not enough. Some people are only looking for AC God, and if Jesus asked them to their face what they are seeking they would tell him they want a God that makes them feel better about their own problems.

I reject that one-dimensional deity and I urge you to as well. Instead, when you are telling your story, invite others to come and see where Jesus would be standing on the front lines of protests and strikes today. Jesus would escort women into Planned Parenthood. Jesus would shield a group of Muslims in prayer. Jesus would offer free hugs to Westboro Baptist Church protestors and Donald Trump supporters. Jesus would join the “Fight for 15” at McDonald’s headquarters in Oak Brook, IL. Jesus would wave a sign saying “I’m a feminist” at the Women’s March. And when anyone asked him what on earth he thought he was doing, he would say to them, “Come and see.”