



1/17/2021 Tingling Ears?

1 Samuel 3:1-10; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; 1 Corinthians 6:12-20; John 1:43-51

Reverend Giuseppe Mattei

Is where we come from important? Nathanael thought so when he dismissed the invitation to come and see the one from Nazareth of whom the prophets had spoken. His quick reply to Philip was a cynical “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” That question implies judgment, a social hierarchy of importance, and a willingness to shame one into insignificance. What does one from Nazareth have to teach? Do we carry prejudices in regard to people from rural America? From the cities? From the Bible Belt or the Rust Belt? Are people from the Northern European countries valued more than those from the Mediterranean region? Are North Americans more important than South American people or the people from the Middle East, Africa, and Asia?

Is geographic provenience a determining factor on one’s worth as a human being and one’s potential contribution to society? Is the fact that one may be coming from an impoverished area an indication of his abilities or even his character? What we prioritize and glorify as individuals and as a society may not be what God values and coming closer to God requires a purification of attitudes, thoughts, and actions.

By now we may have come to the conclusion that where we come from isn’t as important as where we end up. On a spiritual level, if we consider life as a pilgrimage on Earth, it is whom we follow, whom we listen to, and whom we emulate that is going to make a dramatic difference of eternal consequences.

It is part of our sinful condition to roll our eyes and pass judgments on the way people look, talk, dress, think, or act. Christians are not immune to judging others on account of their education level, social status, skin color, faith practice, and party affiliation. The Church at large can be pretty stubborn and vicious when confronting issues of gender identification, gay people’s rights, women’s ordination, economic equity, racial justice, health care, gun proliferation, immigration, and environmental devastation. So much of what is passed as Christianity is nothing but religious nationalism, that is, the glorification of a way of life where Christian values are intermingled with a certain American ideology.¹ This is covert idolatry and is part of our brokenness and when God’s truth exposes that many people may feel uncomfortable and challenged.

At the end of the first chapter of the gospel John, Jesus calls his first disciples to follow him. The following is initiated by two of John the Baptist’s disciples who have heard his proclamation that Jesus is the Son of God. As Jesus inquires about what they are looking for, their immediate reply is a question of their own about where Jesus is staying. This is not a request about a geographic place, nor is it mere curiosity about the dwelling that gives shelter to the prophet. In

¹ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/scot-mcknight/2020/august/lets-talk-about-christian-nationalism.html> and <https://religionnews.com/2019/08/02/christian-leaders-condemn-christian-nationalism-in-new-letter/>



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John the Evangelist's proper fashion, the truth is deeper than the surface would suggest. The two men's inquiry is about Jesus' spiritual abode. In a way, they are asking: "Where do you stand? What are you about? Where is your heart? What turns you on?" Theirs is a question about meaning, purpose, and life orientation.

It is by no coincidence that the following verses abound with verbs that encourage personal experience ("Come and see") and succeeding indications of people being "found." In other words, following Jesus implies a commitment to finding one's true self in relation to the God who gives plentiful life in stark contrast to the distracting and devious lies of the world. No wonder Jesus has been called the Light of the world!

Jesus does not call us to follow him to take a stroll in the park. He does not even invite us to follow him to find personal peace. It wasn't his message about personal peace that nailed him to a cross. We might have misunderstood his gift of abiding in his peace with a desire to be sheltered in turbulent times. Although Jesus does invite us to pray for protection from evil, he never said we would never encounter the cross in our life. Quite the contrary, he challenged us to pick it up and embrace it as a way to find hope and deliverance.

He didn't preach to the choir telling them what they already knew or wanted to hear. Jesus, like all the prophets before him, spoke boldly on behalf of the poor and the afflicted. Those who were at the social margins of society became the center of his attentions, and those who were at the top of the social ladder sat mostly on the fence when he spoke: they self-isolated and self-excluded from the grace of God and the company of Jesus.

Many people didn't like what Jesus had to say and soon turned their backs on him. To the political leadership, Jesus, probably, sounded a lot like an enemy of the state and his words an incitement to rebellion. The Pharisees, on their side, were quick to dismiss Jesus as a devil worshipper, a demon possessed, and a liar who had set his mind on destroying their credibility and the religious institution of Israel which they represented. It wasn't too long that those who felt offended by his words started plotting against him.

To be sure, Jesus' new and yet old message attracted crowds. But soon he lost most of his followers to the point that he questioned the loyalty of even his inner circle. He challenged the disciples to take a stand: "Do you also want to leave me?" which prompted Peter's response on behalf of the group: "Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God." (John 6:66-69)

The poor whose feet Jesus came to wash are the same poor that Mary sang about in her joyful proclamation: "[God] knocked tyrants off their high horses, pulled victims out of the mud. The



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starving poor sat down to a banquet; the callous rich were left out in the cold.”² Jesus, like the prophets who came before him, acted on the sentiments of God who always listens to the cry of the poor and sides with the downtrodden.

How can Christians respond in ways that are coherent with the gospel message to the social tensions we have seen in the last several months? To follow Jesus means learning from him and embracing what gives *him* life. If he is the Way, we honor him when we engage in life espousing *his* non-violent Way of doing things. If he is the Truth, we cut through the lies of the world and hold on to *his* soul-revealing Truth. If he is the Life, we renounce death-dealing impulses and contribute to the flourishing of Life all around us.

Deacon Michelle went over the Baptismal Promises with you during her sermon last week. She read to you the Profession of Faith that asks the candidate to Baptism (or their parents/sponsors) to declare their faith in Christ Jesus, reject sin, and confess the faith of the church. This includes “the devil and all the forces that defy God, the powers of this world that rebel against God, and the ways of sin that draw us away from God.”³ Further, we are to “live among God’s faithful people; hear the Word of God and share in the Lord’s Supper; proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed; serve all people following the example of Jesus; and strive for justice and peace in all the earth.”⁴

On top of that, in the ELCA, ordained ministers take a vow that requires them to preach and teach in accordance with the Holy Scriptures, to speak for justice on behalf of the poor and oppressed, and to equip the Church for witness and service.

Often, a question comes up about the separation of Church and State. Usually, we lean on that concept when we do not like what we hear preached from the pulpit. That question has legitimacy when you hear a preacher giving indications on how to vote on any given social issue and for whom to vote. The First Amendment’s intent, however, is about keeping the Church free from State interference in the exercise of the faith and to prevent the establishment of a state church. It is certainly not intended to intimidate, prevent, and censure the preacher from addressing issues of public concern.⁵ A sermon that elaborates on the second table of the Ten Commandments is by necessity going to deal with social interactions and, therefore, sound political. When ears tingle, don’t blame the messenger. (cf. 1 Samuel 3:11)

² Luke 1:52-53

³ Holy Baptism, Evangelical Lutheran Worship, 229.

⁴ Affirmation of Baptism, Evangelical Lutheran Worship, 236.

⁵ https://www.elca.org/JLE/Articles/1283?_ga=2.45446116.1596792044.1610640855-1790700543.1605824149



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Please, pray for me and all the leaders of the Church who exercise the ministry of preaching that we may be ever faithful in studying and interpreting the Holy Scriptures in accordance with the promptings of the Holy Spirit; that we may be courageous in speaking the Truth which often may be uncomfortable for both the speaker and the listener; and that we may be alert to the temptation to avoid sensitive issues that run counter to the gospel for fear of retaliation.

Please, pray for one another that we may all be faithful to our baptismal vows and contribute to the health and wellbeing of all people unincumbered by party ideology; that we may follow Jesus free from the grip of fear, stubbornness, and selfish tendencies. Amen.