

"Transformed in the Faith"

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First Presbyterian Church
Sunday, January 16, 2011

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON - Isaiah 49:1-7

NEW TESTAMENT LESSON - John 1:35-43

Some of you may remember my friend and colleague Patrick Dennis, who preached for us during my installation service. I don't know anybody as lit up by his or her faith as is Patrick. Maybe you sensed that if you heard him preach.

And I'm convinced that the reason Patrick comes across this way is because of the joy he finds in living out his call as a follower of Christ. Although Patrick has faced the full range of successes and failures, joys and tragedies of life, like we all have, he always brings his faith to bear upon any situation. Patrick Dennis has such joy, so much so that it can be truly overwhelming for those of us more grounded in the "real world," tethered to earth by our day-to-day concerns.

I first learned this about Patrick during an ice-breaker at the start of a seminary course we took together. Each person was asked to introduce a classmate to the whole class. When Patrick introduced me, he was really over the top. You could sense his unabashed love for me as a friend. I'll never forget his words, spoken through an ear-to-ear grin that bubbled with energy and excitement: "It is my distinct pleasure and honor to introduce Mr. David C. Carlson. Dave is awesome. He's a great guy and a wonderful friend. We are really blessed to have him here. He brings so much to the seminary community, leading small groups for prayer and spiritual development, being a faithful study partner, having a great sense of humor, and he's always willing to help out a friend."

During the next 20 or 30 seconds, as Patrick continued with such accolades, I began feeling embarrassed both for me and for my friend. You could tell the class realized he was way "over the top" on this thing. Then it was my turn to introduce Patrick. I stood up, took my place in front of the class, looked Patrick in the eye and said, "I don't even know this guy." Laughter erupted throughout the class, as I showed off my "great sense of humor" at the expense of my best friend. I went on to introduce Patrick, but I've always sensed that the bond between us was weakened that day; that I may have killed off a little bit of our love for one another – a little bit of Christ – in my effort to recover from the embarrassment I felt; embarrassment in the face of such brotherly love so openly and honestly expressed.

Patrick and I have the same calling in Jesus Christ. I don't mean as pastors, I mean as followers of Christ along side each and every one of you. After all it is the same Jesus who once spoke into our hearts and said "Come and see". And yet Patrick lives in a place of joy that I only visit from time to time. I'd love to move their permanently.

And I hope that with God's help that's just what I'm doing when I join my voice with that of John the Baptist's two disciples, who having seen Jesus for the first time, said to him, "Rabbi (teacher), where are you staying;" where do you live?

Jesus said to them, "'Come and see.'

They came and saw where he was staying," we are told, "and they remained with him that day." What is it to remain with Jesus this day? Is there anything about it that brings us joy or is our faith an obligation whose reward is waiting for us in heaven?

Today, we begin a four-part series looking at how our faith affects us personally, how it affects other people, our world, and the very foundation of life. As we ask what it means to remain, to stay with Jesus this day, let's take a look at how being a follower of Christ changes us, shapes us, challenges us, and rewards us?

God created us for joy and happiness. But joy and happiness are two different things. One comes from God no matter what; the other tends to be tied much more closely to having things work out in our favor. Happiness is a checkbook that has money, a car that works, a good date for Saturday night. Happiness is the absence of major hassles, or terrorism or crime; happiness is kids getting good grades and our spouse getting a raise. Happiness is something we know as enhancement or protection of our *own lives*.

Joy comes in connection with *another* person's life. Joy can happen without money or a working car. Joy happens when we get to the core of life and realize that love is at the core. Joy befriends us, even when happiness betrays us. Joy can withstand any moment we may encounter; happiness crumbles the minute we get in over our heads.

It's like the old saying: Some people bring joy wherever they go. Other people bring joy *whenever* they go. The only sure way to lasting happiness is to bring joy to another person in Christ-like fashion. When we share the joy of being a follower of Christ, God provides for our happiness, because our happiness is no longer focused on us, but rather it is turned outward toward others. Even when we don't get our own way, we are happy for the other person.

This is what it is as an individual to be a follower of Christ, to be transformed in the faith. God can work with that. God can enter into our lives – enter into your life – and transform any struggle or hardship into joy.

There's a woman in our country fighting for her life right now. Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords dedicated her life to serving others, and in the midst of living up to that calling, she was gunned down (along with six people who died and 12 others who were wounded). If Giffords fully recovers, and we pray that she does, we pray that all the wounded and the victims' families recover, can you imagine a scenario in which she – in which they – have joy in her life again? I can. I can imagine Giffords using this tragedy to quell divisive rhetoric within our country. And I can imagine her taking great joy in that.

I can equally imagine her and the others hanging onto hate for the happiness that was taken from them a week ago Saturday. Joy in what they can give to others, or hate for what's been taken from them. Following Christ, or going it alone. Which do you think can turn tragedy into triumph, injury into healing, wrong into right?

When Jesus sees the two Baptist's disciples following him, he turns to them and says, "What are you looking for?" They say to him, "Rabbi (teacher), where are you staying?" Jesus says, "Come and see."

"Come and see." It's an open house. People are invited to stop in and see a new home, remember an anniversary, celebrate a holiday. "Come and see." Don't make a big fuss. Don't dress up. Don't bring presents. Just come and be with us! "Come and see;" it's an invitation into relationship. Yes, there is almost always a good "excuse" for the invitation. At its core, however, is a warm welcome, openness, a desire for relationship. "Come and see." No proclamation of what to believe, no list of requirements, and no denouncing the other side.

Let's you and I accept Jesus' invitation, right now; to go where he is staying; enter his house for a moment. Close your eyes, or gaze upward or downward. What do you imagine you find there, in Jesus' home? An entryway with a wall plaque that says, "Welcome friend." A table with a place at it just for you. A cozy, comfortable living room with deep-cushion chairs inviting you to sit and stay awhile; hugging you so close you can't imagine rushing to get up or fidgeting about. A place where Jesus sits so that everyone can see his smile, and more importantly, he can see you, and hear what everyone has to say. No clock on the wall to tell you it's time to get going. When the time comes, you'll know.

Then a child burst in the room. "Come and see, Jesus!" she shouts. "How joyfully and spontaneously a child interrupts a parent with the urgent invitation to come and see. With delight, we go and see the child's creation — a drawing, her sand castle, his Lego house. With words of praise, we see their latest accomplishment – balancing on a skateboard, mastering a piano piece, pouring their own juice"*

And you struggle to get up from your comfortable chair: It's time to go. Jesus is on the move again, and we fall in line after him. Andrew heard Jesus utter the words "Come and see." And hearing these words, he summoned his brother Simon Peter, and together, they fell in line following after Jesus.

"We have found the Messiah (the anointed one)," Andrew exclaims as he brings Simon to Jesus. Jesus looks "at him and (says), 'You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas' (which is translated Peter)."

And thus, Peter becomes a disciple, a follower of Jesus, transforming everything that happens to him from mere happiness into ever lasting joy. Peter claims for himself a life of giddy happiness walking on water, and the heartfelt joy of being lifted up by Jesus when he's in over his head; he takes on the happy life of self-assured apostle of Christ, and opens himself up to receiving forgiveness three times over after denying he even knows his beloved friend and spiritual guide; he experiences the happiness of being given the keys to the gates of heaven, and the joy of being embraced by Jesus upon entering.

"Come and see." It was a simple invitation with no strings attached. Jesus extends this same invitation to you – and to me. Do we accept? Are we ready to leave behind our happy lives as "a Simon" to enter into the joy of becoming like Peter – the rock on which Jesus is building the faith, the vessel through which he shares it with the world? Peter and Andrew were ready. Are we? Are we willing to go where Jesus lives, to stay there and to learn of him? And if so, what will find there?

According to *USA Today*, the 5 greatest ways to enjoy the thrill of trying something new are:

The Canyoneering Course at Cedar City, Utah, where you can learn to "safely descend into and ascend out of canyons and swim in swift water.

Odyssey Adventure (Mountain-Bike) Racing Academy at New River Gorge, West Virginia. "Beginners get race-ready in less than a week ... starting with Trailblazing 101."

National Outdoor Leadership School in Lander, Wyoming. Lessons and climbing instruction help you "get around (and over) the 12,000-foot peaks."

Mount Hood Summer Ski Camps in Government Camp, Oregon. A "six-day snowboard camp at the only year-round ski hill in the country."

And for the less athletic of us, the:

Royal Tine Guide & Packer School in Philipsburg, Montana. Learn to "churn out gourmet on-the-go feasts, like breakfast quiche or Cornish game hen."

I can imagine getting a lot of happiness diving into any one of these activities. But where's the joy in that. I'm just not sure I would meet Jesus.

Jesus lives:

where the poor are. So we volunteer to sort and distribute food at Harvesters, 'cause that's where you'll find the joy of being with Jesus.

Jesus can be found where the children are, because they're special people of the kingdom of God and they need teachers and people who will spend time with them.

Jesus is found with those who have no one to love them.

Jesus is in the community of faith where worship and study take place.

Jesus lives in the written words of Scripture.

Jesus lives in the presence of the eternal God, who hears our prayers.

These are the places where we'll find Jesus; these are the places where we receive the joy of being transformed in the faith.

*Excerpted from "*Come and See Jesus*" by Mark S. Hanson in *The Lutheran* magazine.

Being a follower Jesus changes who you are because it changes where you go and what you look for when you get there:

a food bank instead of a mountaineering camp, where you'll find the poor and lowly making the climb of their lives;

a classroom or a child's study area, where you'll find God's most precious gift waiting to be shown the recipe for success.

Jesus is ready to transform your life – our lives – if we'll but fall in line and follow after him. Amen.