



Sacraments and Sacred Moments:
“CALLED TO FOLLOW”
(Ordination)

John 1:43-51

Rev. Elbert Paul Dulworth

First United Methodist Church
Birmingham, Michigan

In a classic *Peanuts* comic strip, one day Charlie Brown, Linus, and Lucy find themselves at the top of a hill gazing up at the cloud formations that they see in the sky. Lucy says, “Aren’t the clouds beautiful? They look like big balls of cotton... I could just lie here all day and watch them drift by... If you use your imagination, you can see lots of things in the cloud formations... What do you think you see, Linus?”

Linus says, “Well, those clouds up there look to me like the map of the British Honduras on the Caribbean...that cloud up there looks a little like the profile of Thomas Eakins, the famous painter and sculptor...and that group of clouds over there gives me the impression of the stoning of Stephen...I can see the apostle, Paul, standing there to one side...”

Lucy responds, “Uh huh... That’s very good... What do you see in the clouds, Charlie Brown?”

Charlie Brown responds, “Well, I was going to say that I saw a duckie and a horsie, but I changed my mind.”¹

I don’t know about you, but I won’t quite look at the clouds the same again. We laugh, but sometimes our perceptions are different, aren’t they?

In our scripture lesson this morning, we hear the story of Jesus calling Phillip and Nathanael as disciples. It’s curious to note how each of the disciples encounters Jesus differently. Each of their perceptions of Jesus are varied from one another.

If we were to read the passage just before our lesson this morning, we’d notice that Jesus passes by John the Baptist as John is standing with two of his own disciples. John refers to Jesus as the “Lamb of God.” So these two disciples start following Jesus. When Jesus asks them, “What are you looking for?” they inquire, “Rabbi, where are you staying?” Jesus invites them, saying, “Come and see.” And they followed him.²

John the Baptist calls Jesus “Lamb of God.” The first two disciples call him “Rabbi.” One of those first two that followed Jesus was Andrew. Andrew had a brother named Simon, whom Jesus called “Peter” or “Cephas.” Andrew went to get his brother, Simon, and said, “We have found the Messiah.”³

Lamb of God, Rabbi, Messiah—do you see how different each of these perspectives can be of Jesus? “Lamb of God” involves a sacrificial understanding of the work of Jesus as the one who is offered up for humanity. “Rabbi” is the Hebrew word for “teacher.” “Messiah” has an apocalyptic understanding that includes the restoration of God’s reign among the people. It involves the restoration of a promised land and includes a God-ordained king as a part of the inherited promise. All of these understandings are present just before our passage begins with the calling of Phillip and Nathanael. It’s a good thing poor Charlie Brown didn’t have to weigh in at this point in the Gospel lesson.

As our lesson begins this morning, Jesus has made his way back north from the River Jordan to the region of Galilee. There he finds Phillip, who is from Bethsaida, on the northern edge of the lake, and invites him, saying, “Follow me.” Bethsaida is also the city of Andrew and Simon Peter.

When Phillip goes to tell Nathanael about Jesus, he describes him as the one about whom both Moses and the prophets wrote. Phillip also tells Nathanael who he is by sharing his name as well as his lineage and hometown. He infers to Nathanael that this guy, “Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth,” is something more than just a son of a man named Joseph from Nazareth. Phillip sees Jesus fulfilling the scriptures.⁴

For the first time, however, one of potential disciples is skeptical. The others followed, but Nathanael asks, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”⁵ Do you notice, however, that Phillip doesn’t debate the issue with Nathanael? He doesn’t provide some counterpoint to prove him wrong. Rather, Phillip invites Nathanael with the same words that Jesus invited the first two the day before, “Come and see.”⁶ In other words, “Come and see for yourself. Check it out and then make a judgment on what you think about him.” Could it be that Nathanael hears the story and initially sees something as simplistic as Charlie Brown sees in the clouds? So Phillip invites him to look closer, saying, “Come and see.”

As Nathanael approaches, Jesus calls out to him, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!”⁷ When he sees him, Jesus doesn’t critique Nathanael for his skepticism, but he praises him. Somehow, even with his questions, Nathanael has come to see for himself about this Jesus, and Jesus practically announces that Nathaniel is not one to be fooled; he’s checking out Phillip’s pronouncement.

Still skeptical, however, Nathanael asks, “How do you know me?” So Jesus tells him how he saw him under the fig tree before Phillip called him. It’s this encounter with Jesus that becomes the moment of faith for Nathanael as he says, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”⁸ From “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” to “Rabbi” “Son of God” and “King of Israel,” Nathanael’s experience reflects the full scope of the journey of faith. Nathanael

was invited to “Come and see,” and when he discovered that Jesus knew all about him, Nathanael came to faith.

Several years ago as a student pastor, I was teaching a study in one of my local churches. At some point or another, we came to the topic of evangelism or “sharing our witness to Jesus.” I’ll never forget the night that one member of the group looked at me and said, “Pastor Elbert, I’d rather leave evangelism up to you. You’re the professional. You’re the one that’s trained to do this work. That’s why you’re in seminary. I could be leading someone to Jesus and mess everything up. Then what happens to that person’s soul rests entirely upon my mistake.”

I thought about what Jim said for moment, briefly wondering if I’d ever messed up the work of evangelism. Could I say something that might send someone to “you know where”? That was a lot of weight that Jim had placed on my shoulders. Even more so, that was a lot of fear that he had about what could happen if he simply sought to share his faith.

Is that really why there are those who are ordained and licensed for ministry? Are clergy those who are called to be the professional evangelists, or witnesses? Is it our task to bring in the final sale of commitment to Jesus? Jim really had me thinking about my calling that day.

The first disciples, however, were invited with the words of “Follow me” and “Come and see.” Their witness was simply to share what they had experienced and then they invited others, including a skeptic, to “Come and see” for themselves what they had come to know and experience in Jesus Christ.

Do we sometimes make evangelism and witnessing out to be the task of a few qualified professionals rather than a simple invitation to “Come and see” what God has done, is doing, and might do among us?

Last week, as candidates for ministry were once again approved for licensing, commissioning, and ordination at the clergy session of the annual conference, I thought back to a question that still rings in my mind from my own candidacy process so many years ago. Not too long after my conversation with Jim, I was filling out my own paperwork for my own examination before the Board of Ordained Ministry. Perhaps Jim helped me to understand our work together more fully. One of the questions was something like “What does it mean for you to be called to the office and work of an ordained elder in the Church?”

Every time the bishop celebrates a service of recognition, commissioning, and ordination, I’m reminded of my answer. Perhaps unknowingly, Jim helped me to write my response. Ordination is a gift of God to the whole Church. Those who are ordained are called to live a life set apart, but not above, in the life of the Church. Together with our sisters and brothers, we are called to lead God’s people in witness to Jesus and to the life that all Christians are called to live.

We live that out as ordained elders in ministries of Word (preaching), Service (with all people), Sacrament (sharing the sacraments of holy communion and baptism as a means of grace), and Order (ordering the life of the church as worship leaders and administrators). My sisters and brothers who serve as deacons live a life of Word and Service in such a way as to serve as a

bridge between the Church and world. In very real ways, the role of ordained clergy is to lead God's people in witnessing to God's presence in the world in Jesus Christ.

Our work together then, as ordained clergy and laity, is to be a living witness to God's presence in the world in Jesus Christ. It is our work together, as with the disciples, to invite people to "Come and see." Together, we have a story to tell. Our individual stories may be as varied as each disciple's experience of Jesus when they were called. Together, however, we are called to invite others on this journey with us.

As we do, we invite others to think about whether God may be calling them in special ways to lead us and grace us as the body of Christ. We have a long history at Birmingham First of inviting people to hear God's call to ministry. Here in this place, you send others out to share the stories they learned among you. When candidates hear their call to ministry, it so often happens out of their experience of Jesus in the local church.

Last year, as we reached our Vacation Bible School capacity limit of 300, I asked Kelly, our Director for Children, Student and Family Ministry, what it would take to reach 400 this year. I did so because I know that it is through these early ministries of the church that children so often hear their own call to ministry. It is in serving as VBS volunteers that youth hear God's calling to lead us as a church in this special way. As of early this week, we had 357 children registered for VBS and registrations were still expected in this past week.

Now I want you to know that in order for us to be successful, we still are in need of many volunteers to make this work. If you haven't signed up to volunteer, please do so. I'm signed up already to help out. Shawn is, too. Whether you can pack up snacks in the kitchen, do crafts, or help with music or classes, you are needed at VBS this year. Please check with Kelly about how you can help to make it even better than last year.

As a youth in a small membership congregation, I heard God calling and experienced Jesus' invitation as I led a small group of kids in a junior church program. Just the other day, I went to visit a friend who was retiring from ministry and moving into his own home for the first time in his life after living in parsonages throughout his career. I noticed that in his living room, he had a beautiful baptismal font. Jokingly, I asked him whether he swiped the font from one of his churches.

He laughed and then said, "Elbert, that font is from your home church." He bought it when my home church closed because he liked it. That church closed when I was in college. I looked at my friend and told him, "I was baptized at that font." There, in his living room, amid the boxes and a font, I remembered the day of my own baptism as well as the multitude of sacred moments that helped me to say "Yes" when I was invited to "Come and see." Who might be called and empowered to follow when we extend the invitation to "Come and see?" How might faith sprout forth from a simple invitation?

In her book, *Searching for Sunday*, author Rachel Held Evans notes that:

Alexander Schmemmann says, “If there are priests in the Church, if there is the priestly vocation in it, it is precisely in order to reveal to each vocation its priestly essence, to make the whole life of all men the liturgy of the Kingdom, to reveal the Church as the royal priesthood of the redeemed world.”

Ultimately, all Christians share the same calling. According to the apostle Peter, we are “royal priests,” invited to “show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9 NLT).

Whenever we show others the goodness of God, whenever we follow our Teacher by imitating his posture of humble and ready service, our actions are sacred and ministerial. To be called into the priesthood, as all of us are, is to be called to a life of presence, of kindness.⁹

How might we together invite those around us to “Come and see” in our daily lives that they, too, might experience the One who invites us together to follow?

¹ <http://www.philipchircop.com/post/11245668821/what-do-you-see-arent-the-clouds-beautiful>

² John 1:36-39.

³ John 1:42.

⁴ John 1:43-45.

⁵ John 1:46.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ John 1:47.

⁸ John 1:48-49.

⁹ Evans, Rachel Held. *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church* (pp. 115-116). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.