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First Presbyterian Church
September 12, 2021
John 1:35-51

**“I’ve Been Meaning to Ask:
Where Are You From?”**

September 12, 2001. Do you remember what you did and where you were the morning after? I remember falling asleep the night before with the TV on and the news scrolling at the bottom of the screen. That was new. I remember I was glad George W. Bush was our president and not Al Gore, because Bush seemed tougher and better up for the task that faced our nation. I remember flying the flag, as did everyone else on my street. As did everyone else, period. I remember putting together a prayer service at my former church for September 14 because the President declared it a National Day of Prayer and Remembrance and of course I would do that. And people came, and church the following Sunday was packed. I remember in the days following 9/11 the skies were eerily silent, and when Terry and I attended a dinner not far from the St. Louis airport, the planes were all lined up with no place to go, and that was a really weird scene to take in. I remember the country came together. Of course we would come together. We’d been attacked. What other response could there possibly be?

If 9/11 were to happen today, would we come together again?

I’m kicking off a new sermon series today titled “I’ve Been Meaning to Ask”. It is a series about listening to one another. And folks, if there’s anything this world and country needs right now, it’s the ability to listen. We just don’t listen to one another anymore; and when I say we, I really mean we! We don’t listen to people we don’t like, we tune out people who don’t agree with us, we think we have a corner on the truth and everyone else is wrong, and we increasingly live in our own echo chambers.

This is not good. It’s not good for us, for our community or country, or our faith. You heard the story I read to the children; God does not want us to all think alike and look alike. Jesus continually crossed boundaries and borders to talk with people who didn’t look or think or act like him. He engaged in courageous

conversations that often began with simple questions and he was willing to listen to people's answers.

So for the next 4 weeks, that is what we are going to do. Today, we begin with the simple question, "Where are you from?"

I've been thinking about this question all week, because my initial response when I'm asked where I'm from is to say, "I'm from Akron, Ohio." But I've also spent 4 years in Connecticut, 2 in Kentucky, 5 in Wisconsin, and 18 in St. Louis. In fact, I spent as many years in St. Louis as I did in Akron. But I would never say I from St. Louis, because St. Louisans have a unique way of knowing if someone is really from St. Louis.

Native St. Louisans are known to ask people, "Where'd you go to school?" and by school they mean high school; for those of us lived there but weren't from there it's a really weird question. Like, who cares where I went to high school? But for St. Louisans it tells them everything they need to know about a person's socio economic background. So if you say you went to John Burroughs or MICDS, very prestigious and expensive private schools, well, you're someone; but if you went to high school in North County or south county, not so much. It's a weird and not very accurate sorting method, but it's their sorting method. And truth be told, if we're being honest with ourselves, we all have our sorting method. It just seems to be the way we're wired. We want to know something about a person's background. Where is he/she from? Does she/he have a family? Who were his/her parents? Where was she/he educated? We form opinions about people often before we actually get to know them. It's as if someone could not possibly be the exception to the rule, either positively or negatively. We put more value on externals than we do internals. Where are you from, we ask? And we get a picture of who someone is based on his or her response.

Even the disciples did it – most especially Nathaniel who asks, "Can anything good from Nazareth?" Nathaniel assumed that Jesus' place of origin could explain who he was. But he was wrong. Turns out the Messiah really could hail from a place like Nazareth.

And that was big surprise to people, because Nazareth was a really small village. Only 200 or so people lived there. It relied heavily on the nearby city for its well-being. Most people thought of Nazareth as a back-water, po-dunk town out of

which no-nothings and ner-do-wells came. It was also a town of ill repute, known in Biblical times as an ungodly place. It was the last place one expected to find the future messiah. People would have looked to Jerusalem or another big high-falootin city to find the messiah; not Nazareth.

So when Philip told Nathaniel that Jesus was the one Moses and the prophets spoke of, Nathaniel thought Philip was mistaken. There was no possible way Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah. Surely the Messiah would come from a prominent family and from a more significant background than that.

After all, “Can anything good from Nazareth?” Nathaniel’s derogatory question reflects the same narrow-mindedness that will haunt Jesus throughout his ministry because Nathaniel isn’t the last person to jump to conclusions. Why, all throughout John’s gospel there is the very important theological idea that appearances are not what they seem.

When my son Tommy was a high school Junior, he was a member of Cultural Leadership, which is a program in St. Louis that trains high schoolers from across the metro area to be, in their words, troublemakers of the best kind. Originally Cultural Leadership only accepted students who were Jewish or Black so they could learn from each other about the similar prejudices each group experiences, but they slowly started accepting a small number of white allies to join Cultural Leadership. Tommy, the only white Christian young man in the class, was an ally. Cultural Leadership is dedicated to creating a more just community by training youth to be the next generation of civil rights leaders, and one of their goals is to dispel ethnic and cultural stereotypes.

The program culminates in a 3 week trip, what is called a transformational journey that takes the students to NYC, Washington DC, and the civil rights landmarks throughout the south. They met incredible people on the journey, including the late Rep. John Lewis and Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg. And when I say meet, I don’t mean just meet as in shake their hands, I mean they have a one hour meeting with people where they really get to ask questions and learn from other people. It really is a “come and see” moment.

After the trip, Tommy said that one of the persons who had the greatest impact on him was Justice Clarence Thomas. He said, “What I expected from Clarence Thomas is not what I got. What I expected (Tommy’s words, not mine) was some

closed-minded opinions. What I got were well thought out opinions and life stories tied to them. He explained to us that not everything is black and white, and that in order to really understand problems in our society sometimes we have to dive deeper. And in order to be a really great leader in the future, I must understand everyone and every perspective.”

Tommy learned something on that trip that he’ll carry with him forever – and that is that in order to move beyond the preconceived notions we carry around of what people are like, we must be willing to come and see; which is to say, sit down with people and talk to them and get to know them and listen to them. It all sounds so simple – but how many times do we fail to do it? And I mean we – you, me, liberal, conservative, Republican, Democrat, red state/blue state – we form these preconceived ideas of people before we ever meet them. But friends, if we’re going to get past the polarizations that effect our country, we need to be willing to come and see, because understanding begins with relationships, and relationships begin with the invitation to come and see. Scripture is loaded with stories about people whose perceptions are changed based on an encounter with someone who holds a different opinion. Nathaniel had this preconceived idea of God and who God was and most importantly who God was not. And one thing God surely was not was a peasant carpenter’s son from Nazareth. And yet, Nathaniel changed his mind about that because he was willing to go and see and sit and listen.

But in order to listen, we need to tame our tongues, an admonition James gives us in the scripture you heard Carrie read. “How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire!” James writes. “With [the tongue] we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God.”

James reminds us that our words have great power, and the “mistakes” we say affect the Body of Christ. These spoken mistakes might be gossip, lying or bullying, or speaking ill of those whom we have already formulated an opinion. And this speech is not life giving or aligned with God’s will in Christ because it hurts and harms. And there is a lot of it these days. Online forums, comments on social media, anonymous postings . . . anyplace, really, where we can speak or write but not be held accountable for what we say can and will destroy a community.

This is why James encourages us to have empathy towards others by keeping their identity as children of God at the forefront of our minds, because doing that will check our speech. And checked speech makes us better listeners.

Because we too are called to go and see; to stretch ourselves for the sake of the gospel so we can understand the experiences of other people. And perhaps when we do that, we will mend the torn fabric of our deeply divided and segregated communities, because the mission of the church is to nurture, promote, work for, and celebrate the oneness of the human family, not to divide it or fragment it more than it already is.

When we leave the church and go into the world, God asks nothing less of us than to look at one another through gospel lenses-which means recognizing Christ in everyone we meet, regardless of background, education level, sexual orientation, city or country of origin, gender or race, or political party.

To quote former First Lady Michelle Obama, in writing about 9/11, "It's up to all of us to make sure that we're honoring all those memories that come rushing back by living lives that reflect not just the trauma of that day, but the best that was on display, too: our kindness and compassion, our courage and resilience. They're the values that lifted us up twenty years ago. And I hope they can guide us all, not just on an anniversary like this, but every single day."

Come and see, Philip invites Nathaniel. Come and see for yourself, Christ invites all of us. Put on gospel lenses, and get a glimpse of who God is and what God asks us to see in each other.

Amen.

*Beloved God,
You know us inside and out and you still call us to serve you.
Lord, honestly we are often hesitant, afraid, and wish to remain hidden.
Empower us to listen for and to hear your call
Empower us to answer your call with "Here I am Lord"
Empower us to follow you when you call us to follow you.*

*Lord of mercy and justice,
So many have gone before us working to bring
Justice and peace to our country and our world.
Their footsteps seem to big to step into to continue the work you have called us all to;
so we hesitantly step one step at a time, bringing your seeds of hope, justice and peace in a
world crying out for them.*

*Lord of hope,
We pray for our country and our leader, that they may be wise in their decision making. We pray
for healing of our country, reconciliation, forgiveness and peace.*

*Lord of peace,
We pray for your compassion and healing for people in this congregation. We pray for your
comfort and presence for those who are grieving lonely and oppressed. We pray for warmth,
shelter, clothing and food for those who are without.*

*Lord we say to you this day,
"Here we are, your servants willing to preach your word, offer care where care is needed,
presence where presence is needed, and love where your love is needed."
Lord, strengthen us for our ministry today and everyday . . .*

