

I have the privilege of having two groups with whom I study the passages for the coming Sunday. In the first group, there are four of us, and oddly enough, three of us are from Cleveland. Now Cleveland has this strong east/west divide. In general, most of the heavy industry and ethnic communities are on the west side. Most of the money and white Anglo Saxon Protestants are on the east side. I lived on the east side and my two colleagues lived on the west side. I emailed one of them earlier this week to say that it seemed more likely, if we contextualized the gospel lesson, that Jesus would be from Parma, his west side hometown than he would be from Shaker Heights, my east side hometown. Parma is a blue collar community, heavily Polish, with a big Ford plant located right in the middle of it. In the Cleveland area, we might say, nothing good is going to come out of Parma. By the way, my colleague wrote me back to say he's not sure, were that the case, that Jesus would admit to being from Parma.

I think most communities have this kind of local rivalry, whether it is Nazareth and Cana, the east side of Cleveland versus the west side or Ankeny versus West Des Moines. In our reading, though, Nathanael's disparaging comment serves to highlight Jesus' humanity. He's from a nowhere place, nothing special, nothing good's coming out of there. Really, you would imagine they would expect the Messiah to be from Jerusalem, or another town with some significance in the Hebrew Bible, not Nazareth of all places. Nazareth was a small village of 200-400 people, economically dependant on the larger city of Sepphoris, which was capital of Galilee in those days. The Hebrew bible never mentions Nazareth, much less associate it with messianic expectations.

Nathanael makes the mistake, common in the gospel of John, of thinking that he knows something about Jesus because he knows where he is from.

Phillip hears Nathanael's skepticism and responds with a simple "come and see." Which, by the way, is an excellent guide for all of us when we are trying to share about the good news of Jesus Christ. We don't need to counter all the objections we hear. We don't have to defend Jesus and we don't need to argue for Jesus. We just need to invite the one to whom we are speaking to come and see for themselves. We can just let people figure it out for themselves in the place where we figured it out for ourselves. We don't need to convert, we just need to invite. The Holy Spirit will do the rest.

One of the commentators I read shared a quote from a sermon by Phillips Brooks from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Brooks, who by the way is also the author of the Christmas carol, O Little Town of Bethlehem, says in that sermon, "...a man honors me if he takes me back to the source where he found his truth, and bids me drink where he drank. I cannot take another man's truth, but he can show me where he got his, and I will get my own and thank him."

Come and see.

So Nathanael does come, and he has his own encounter with Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus, seeing Nathanael approach says, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit."

Nathanael is astonished. Here's this man, who he hasn't even met, a man from Nazareth of all places, who knows him. Who knows him

Nathanael then confesses that Jesus, now his teacher, is the son of God and King of Israel. His encounter with Jesus puts his former assumptions into perspective as he

realizes it doesn't matter where Jesus is from or who his parents were. His encounter with Jesus leads him to belief that makes all previous concerns insignificant.

Jesus goes on to tell Nathanael, that indeed, he will see greater things than this. That in fact, he will see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the son of man.

He may be from nowhere special, but Jesus is telling Nathanael that he is the very bridge between heaven and earth. He is that point of connection between humans and God.

In the fourth chapter of John's gospel, Jesus stops for a drink at midday and encounters a woman at the well. The fact that this woman is at the well on her own at midday perhaps says something about her and her relationship to her community. Through the course of their conversation, it becomes clear that Jesus knows her. He knows more about her than their brief conversation would account for. He knows her. And so having been known, and having encountered the Messiah, she comes to believe and goes off to tell others, "Come and see a man who told me everything that I have ever done." And those she tells do go, and come to believe on the strength of their own experience.

Come and see. Come and be known. Come and believe.

I put a link to a blog posting by Rachel Held Evans on my facebook page this past week. She begins the post, "People sometimes assume that because I'm a progressive 30-year-old who enjoys Mumford and Sons and has no children, I must want a super-hip church—you know, the kind that's called "Thrive" or "Be" and which boasts "an

awesome worship experience,” a fair-trade coffee bar, its own iPhone app, and a pastor who looks like a Jonas Brother.

While none of these features are inherently wrong, (and can of course be used by good people to do good things), these days I find myself longing for a church with a cool factor of about 0.

That’s right.

I want a church that includes fussy kids, old liturgy, bad sound, weird congregants, and...*brace yourself*...painfully amateur “special music” now and then.

She goes on to explain that she wants to be part of an un-cool church because Jesus hung with the un-cool people. She’s concerned that churches have too great a divide between the people they serve and the people who are members.

She continues: “We have one place for the un-cool people (our ministries) and another place for the cool people (our church services). When we actually bump into one another, things can get awkward, so we try to avoid it.

It’s easy to pick on Elevation Church in this case, but the truth is we’re all guilty of thinking we’re too cool for the least of these. Our elitism shows up when we forbid others from contributing art and music because we deem it unworthy of glorifying God, or when we scoot our family an extra foot or two down the pew when the guy with Aspergers sits down. Having helped start a church, I remember hoping that our hip guests wouldn’t be turned off by our less-than-hip guests. For a second I forgot that in church, of all places, those distinctions should disappear.

Some of us wear our brokenness on the inside, others on the outside.

But we're all broken.

We're all un-cool.

We're all in need of a Savior.

So let's cut the crap, pull the plug, and have us some distracting church services...  
the kind where Jesus would fit right in."

I think her critique is one that we should pay attention to. But I've been un-cool since the fourth grade, when I wore the clothes my mother made, along with my horn-rimmed glasses and braces. RLC is a little less-un-cool since we cleaned up our act on the outside of our building, but I know that we do sometimes have fussy kids, old liturgy and sometimes even weird congregants—to go with the weird pastor. I pray we are a place where all kinds of people can be welcomed and where they will encounter Jesus in the word and in the bread and wine.

People may make assumptions about who we are based on where we're from, but when we invite them here to Resurrection to "come and see," they will have the opportunity to encounter Jesus, they will experience what it is to be known, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, they will believe.

One of my January terms in seminary focused on prison ministry. As a part of that experience I spent a day at the women's prison in Mitchellville. I got to tour the facility with the woman who was the head of religious services for the department of corrections for the state of Iowa. I also got to meet the pastor who led the prison congregation located inside of the prison. They are one of only 17 prison congregations in the country—that is—a congregation located within the walls of the prison, as opposed to ministry that is brought in from outside. They have their own pastor, they have a council, they have all

the usual “church” stuff. The congregation there is called Women at the Well United Methodist Church.

I don't imagine that Women at the Well UMC is a church with a very high coolness rating. But I do believe that God is present in the midst of their community, and that they are a community of women who are known and loved by God. And in the knowing, through the power of the Spirit, more and more women come to believe.

So think about who you can invite to come and see, so that they might have their own encounter with Jesus Christ, so that they might be known, so that they might believe.