

January 20, 2008  
1 Corinthians 1: 1-9  
John 1: 29-42

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Northfield, Minnesota  
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## Come and See

You may remember the PBS series of a few years ago featuring anthropologist and comparative religion scholar Joseph Campbell being interviewed by Bill Moyers. At one point Moyers asked Campbell if, given his lifelong study of religions, he himself had religious faith. Campbell responded, "I don't need faith. I have experience." Campbell's point is clear, though one can argue that faith, understood as trust in God as opposed to assent to a set of doctrines, can itself be the source of religious experience.

This morning's gospel is about religious experience. In it John the Baptist is making a kind of hand off of his own disciples to Jesus, pointing to Jesus and saying, "Behold the lamb of God." Two of John's disciples, Andrew and probably John, take his direction and begin to follow Jesus.

Seeing them following him, Jesus asks them, "What are you looking for?"

They respond, "Where are you staying?"

And he answers, "Come and see."

As the gospel unfolds, we learn that Jesus is inviting them to do a lot more than just see where he is staying. He is inviting them to come and share his life, to see fully who he is. Only then will they find what they are seeking. Like Andrew and John, let us also come and see; let us open ourselves to religious experience, to an experience of the Holy One, as found in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Isn't this what church is really about?

I hasten to say that I don't believe that religious experience is exclusive to the church or to Christianity. Following Joseph Campbell, I believe such experience lies at the heart of all the world's religions. Indeed, religious experience is available to all humankind, to anyone who has been awed by creation and wondered why. But I also believe that church, including First UCC Northfield on a Sunday morning when it's about ten below outside, is an especially fruitful place for those who seek a religious experience.

A confirmand in a church I served for twenty-six years taught me this.

She was a church kid. Whatever the church activity – Sunday school, youth choir, youth fellowship, family dinners – she was always there. The same for confirmation, she came to every class, always did her homework, and always had something to say. And often what she had to say put me on the hot seat. At the first class, she wanted to know when we'd get to the part about how the Christian crusaders slaughtered all the innocent people in the Holy Land. When we got to church history, she asked if Christianity always had been a patriarchal religion or if male domination had begun with Emperor Constantine in the fourth century. Great question, but not for a Sunday night when I'm trying to keep the other six Confirmands from murdering each other.

At the end of confirmation, my custom in those years was to spend some time with each of the confirmands to talk about faith, theology, and whether or not they chose to join the church. When I met with her, we had an insightful conversation in which I shared my interest in the trinity, and she shared her interest in Wicca. Call it a draw. Yet when I asked her if she wanted to join the church, her answer was an emphatic yes. She'd already chosen the dress she wanted to wear and her parents had scheduled the date of her confirmation party. Though I didn't ask, I got the sense, that as a proactive young woman, she might have also sent out a suggested confirmation gift list to relatives and friends.

All this put me in a quandary. I'd say I'm at least as theologically liberal as the typical UCC pastor, but even so for me joining the church without faith, or at least a search for faith, doesn't make sense. Struggling with this, I asked her why she wanted to join. Because, she said, she loved our church. It was her church, where she felt at home, where she felt loved and cared about. Could it be, I asked, that the love she felt in church was the love of God coming to her through Christ. She allowed as to how this might be so. Good enough; sign her up. And now several years later, after multiple awards and scholarships, she is preparing to graduate from seminary. I'm going to keep in close touch with her career, as I'm convinced she'll soon be in a position to offer me a job.

All this happened for her because in her home church she not only heard about the love of God, but she experienced it. At its best, the church is such a vehicle for religious experience. In today's epistle to the church at Corinth, Paul praises this church for what it can be at its best: "sanctified in Jesus Christ", "called to be saints", "every way enriched by Jesus Christ", and "not lacking spiritual gifts."

Having done this, for the next eleven chapters of the epistle he blasts the members of this church for all their short comings, from immorality to turning the Lord's Supper into a pig out. Yet towards the end of the epistle, having been so bluntly honest, he reminds them that, in spite of it all, they are yet, "the body of Christ". So doing, I think Paul teaches us that yes, the church is a flawed human institution; but that also yes, the church is where one can also experience the love of God in Christ.

Following the example of Jesus, Paul sought to expand the community of the church. Jesus had welcomed tax collectors and sinners into the community that had gathered around him. So for Paul in the church, the body of Christ, the social divisions of his day did not matter. Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female – all were part of the church.

This is the message of our first hymn for this morning's service, "We Welcome All People". This hymn was written by a former parishioner of mine and became the unofficial anthem of our church during the Open and Affirming Process, as we worked to develop a statement that we would be a church where the divisions of our day did not matter: divisions such as race, gender, disability, economic status, or sexual orientation. For some of us, this very struggle to help the church become more inclusive is itself the source of religious experience. Doing justice can make one feel very close to God.

As we prepare to celebrate the birthday tomorrow of a prophet of inclusion, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., it helps to understand the full impact of his life to locate him in the movement begun by Jesus that seeks to break down the barriers between people, to include the previously excluded, so that one day all will be accepted as equal children of God.

The church as a whole can be the source of religious experiences as one encounters the love and justice of God within the church. Also, particular parts of the worship of the church can be opportunities where each of us, according to our own nature, can have a religious experience. Like Andrew and John, we can come and see, experience that which fills us with wonder, awe, joy, inspiration, and love.

It could be during the sacred music, or the silence coming when the music is done; it can happen during the reading of scripture or during the sermon that explicates the scripture; it can come during the prayers, voiced or silent; it can come when the children speak, or when the announcements are read; it can come when someone lifts up a joy or asks for help with a concern.

This last has been a source of my own religious experiences. I remember years ago a young woman, maybe 16 or 17, telling the members of her church about her eating disorder and thanking them for their love and support while she was hospitalized. Her courage inspired me; the love of their church that surrounded her and her family inspired me as well. This religious experience from a number of years ago still sustains me, as it does others who were in church on that day.

I've probably said enough and should draw this sermon to a close, but it's cold outside, warm in here; and besides I only have one Sunday after this to tell you all that I know. So I want to go on just a little longer and speak to the skeptic that's in us all and ask the question: How do we know that the feelings we sometimes have in church – awe, wonder, joy, inspiration, love – are really part of a religious experience.

I don't think we can ever prove this conclusively and actually there is little about reality we can prove beyond doubt, but there is evidence that helps us determine if an experience we have had is a religious experience. Using classic tools of discernment, we can ask if our experience is consistent with experiences of God found in scripture, in God's revelation in Christ, and in the lives of the saints. If so, then it is more likely to be a religious experience.

We can also ask what are the fruits, the results of the experience. According to Paul, the fruits of a genuine religious experience are joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control. If an experience is truly religious or spiritual, then it will change us in at least some of these ways. And how do we know that we have changed? Again we can ask the church, ask other members to help us to determine how we are growing spiritually. And furthermore, even as we discern the results of a religious experience, the church provides opportunities for us to use and strengthen them in the service of others.

In a little while, this particular church will hold its annual meeting. In the meeting, we'll talk about the church as being a small business, a non-profit organization, a school, an agency for social change, a therapeutic community, a house of worship, and much else besides. By my count this means a minister is asked to be a CEO, executive director, teacher, prophet, healer, and priest – fine, just pay us accordingly.

And it's appropriate at the annual meeting that we consider the church in its various forms and with its diverse ministries. Like the church at Corinth, we are much a part of this world. Yet we also seek to transcend this world - to experience the holy, the sacred, the love of God. Before anything else, the church is where, like Andrew and John, we are invited to come and see. They found what they were looking for. By God's grace, so will we.

Amen.