

MEETING JESUS
Sermon for Epiphany 2A: Jn 1:29-42
LPC, 1/15/17

How did you meet Jesus?

This question presupposes that you have met Jesus.

I encourage you to interpret that question as figuratively as you need to. Many of us have met Jesus through some kind of intermediary. Perhaps your grandmother told you stories about Jesus. Or your Sunday School teacher. Or your parents taught you to say the Lord's Prayer before you went to bed, like mine did. Or you may have just started reading the Bible by yourself. Or got taken to church and saw a cross on the wall.

Maybe, instead of, or in addition to, one of the above, you got to know someone who really lived out their faith in Jesus, in loving service, in inspired artistic expression, in patient teaching, or in prophetic action. Maybe someone had compassion on you, or forgave you, or fed you, or healed you, or opened your mind to bigger truths than you ever imagined.

Maybe you were even lucky enough to be part of a community where several people were consciously living out their faith in Jesus, so you had multiple role models: multiple ways of meeting Jesus. This is best way to meet Jesus, I think. That's what church is supposed to be. Church is supposed to be a group of people consciously living out their faith in Jesus so that others may meet Jesus, whether or not they ever call Jesus by name.

Some Christians may challenge me on that last clause: that people who meet Jesus through other people may not even call him by name. But according to my reading of the Gospel, it has always been more important that Jesus be known in this world by what he taught and lived and died and rose again for rather than by the name Jesus or by an identifiably Christian creedal statement. Those of you who have stood next to me long enough know what I consider the core of what Jesus taught and lived and died and rose again for: the kingdom of God.

And if you've gotten this far with me you also know what I am going to say next, that the kingdom of God is where people are fed and healed and forgiven and loved and empowered as Jesus fed and healed and forgave and loved and empowered. And that the kingdom of God is near and present in the here and now wherever and whenever people are fed and healed and forgiven and loved and empowered. And that God wants us human beings -- stupid, flawed, stumbling, finite though we are -- to participate in the kingdom of God by feeding and healing and forgiving and loving and empowering as Jesus did.

What I am saying is that to me feeding and healing and forgiving and loving and liberating and doing anything else that supports the kingdom of God as taught and embodied by Jesus, is more important than signing people up to be card-carrying Christians, telling them they are going to hell if they don't do so.

A recent article in the Pittsburgh *Post-Gazette* about shrinking churches in the area claims that an emphasis like the one I just described on the spirit rather than the law of Christianity is what is causing mainline churches to shrink. People today evidently prefer a hard line. They want to know the one right thing to profess and believe to go to heaven. Too much respect for the way other people experience the divine and define ultimate truth is interpreted as vague and inadequate and compromising to the core truth of Christianity: that Jesus is Lord.

Make no mistake. I truly believe Jesus is Lord. I unequivocally believe that the kingdom of God as preached and embodied by Jesus Christ represents ultimate truth. I can also conceive that Almighty God has the power to reveal this truth to other people in different ways than those I have personally experienced. In other words, I believe that Jesus is ultimate truth, but that there are many ways to meet Jesus. There are many ways to meet Jesus which are consistent with the kingdom of God, where feeding, healing, forgiving and loving are the rule.

This started out in my mind as a more conventional Epiphany Season sermon. Epiphany Season is the season following Christmas in which we hear stories of how Jesus is revealed to be the Son of God. In other words, Epiphany is about meeting Jesus and acknowledging him as Lord.

On the first day of Epiphany, the Wise Men meet Jesus and acknowledge him as Lord. This truth comes to them through direct revelation from God, through the stars in the sky, and by direct encounter with the infant Jesus.

Last week, the first Sunday of Epiphany season, we heard the story from the Gospel of Matthew where John the Baptist meets Jesus and acknowledges him as Lord. This too has come to John as a direct revelation from God before the Holy Spirit even descends and the voice from heaven is heard.

This week, the second Sunday of Epiphany we hear the Gospel of John's version of the same events. John the Baptist meets Jesus and acknowledges him as Lord, likewise through direct revelation and the vision of the descending Spirit. Thus far, everyone who has met Jesus has had some kind of direct revelation from heaven about Jesus' divinity.

Within this same passage however, John introduces us to another way of meeting Jesus: of being introduced to Jesus by another human being rather than by God Godself. John tells two of his own disciples, who then become Jesus' disciples. Then one of those two tells his brother Peter. And the outwardly rippling rings of people who have met Jesus expands. Those rings get bigger and bigger in the stories we will hear in the coming weeks as more and more people meet Jesus through people who already know Jesus.

Interestingly, these rings expand not because people who know Jesus tell their friends and acquaintances that they must believe in Jesus or go to hell. These rings expand because someone says, "Come and see."

Here is my point: if we are to acknowledge Jesus as our Lord, let us give ourselves to God to the extent that what people come and see in us truly reflects the kind of Lord Jesus really is: feeding, healing, forgiving, loving and empowering. May others meet Jesus through us.