

## **Where Are You From?**

**John 1:35-51**

**First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)**

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“Where are you from?” When that question is asked we usually answer one of two ways - either with the name of the town in which we were born or the name of the place we live now. But that oversimplification misses so many of the nuances of who we are and where we are from. It also misses the nuances of the impact that different parts of our identity have.

Today we read a story from the Gospel of John that comes right at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. In fact, in John’s gospel we have yet to see Jesus do anything. Rather he was only identified by John the Baptist, and subsequently others began to gather around him. This is a story of people coming to know and be known by Jesus.

And, it’s a great story because there isn’t one single word used to identify him.

In this text Jesus is identified as “Lamb of God,” “Rabbi,” “Messiah”, the one “about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote,” “Son of Joseph from Nazareth,” “Son of God,” “King of Israel,” “Son of Man.” Each of these titles comes with a particular understanding. And it is when they all come together that we get the fullest picture of who Jesus is and who people were beginning to understand him to be.

But, mind you, not all of the identifiers are positive. When Jesus is identified as being from Nazareth, we come to catch a glimpse of the negative perceptions of the place from which he came. Nathanael asks, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” But Jesus simply answers, “Come and see.”

Throughout these interactions, Jesus shapes an environment of discovery. He asks questions: *What are you looking for?* He invites people to join him: *Follow me.* He invites them to know him: *Come and see.* And he names the best of who they are (even in the face of their uncertainty about him): *Here is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!*

The conversations Jesus has, the connections he invites, are about taking time to get to know each other. They are about letting everyone be not only who they are, but their fullest selves.

Over the coming weeks of worship and in small groups we are going to explore the theme, “I’ve Been Meaning to Ask.” We are going to take intentional time to ask and answer, to listen and share. We are going to dive more deeply into relationship as we continue to build a safe and brave community where people can be fully themselves and be fully loved.

As we enter into these conversations, I invite you to hear these reflections from Raj Nadella, New Testament Professor at Columbia Theological Seminary, as he thinks about this scripture and shares his story. (*Play video from A Sanctified Art, <https://sanctifiedart.org>*).

So, church, how do we create safe spaces for coming to know one another, for hearing each others' stories?

How do we create communities where people can trust that questions are asked to connect and include, rather than to distance and exclude?

How do we create environments of curiosity where we ask questions with care and diligence...with respect for people and relationships...with a willingness to unlearn unhelpful or incorrect assumptions?

See, it seems this is what Jesus was about. He was about building relationships and creating safe space. He was about setting down his own assumptions and helping others do the same. He was about allowing honesty, allowing people to be fully who they were and helping them become more fully all that God created them to be.

If we are followers of Jesus, then aren't we called to do the same?

So, what if we were willing to engage in relationships such that we could see each other for who we really are - even what we might call the "good, bad and ugly" - and find our way together?

Today is Welcome! Sunday. This day here at First Christian used to be mostly focused on kicking off our programming for children and youth, but it has grown to be more about finding our way into regular rhythms, connecting with people of all ages, spending time together. Perhaps this is a starting place, a gentle step in, to building these kind of relationships.

What if today we committed to nurturing curiosity together?

What if today we committed to listening to each other's stories...not the stories we think we already know, but the stories people are telling about their own lives...and what if in doing so, we came to see and to know and to love the truth of who each one is?

Think about that question: Where are you from? As Raj said, this isn't only about place, but it is bigger, more metaphorical. Where are you from? What people and places and experiences have shaped you? What joys and hurts do you carry with you?

What if we listened to each other's stories and gave safe space to hear?

If you asked me where I am from you might hear something like this...

I am from a childhood of mud pies, bike rides, summer sprinklers, and hours spent playing dress up. I am from a household where I always knew I was unconditionally loved. I am from the crochet hook of one grandma, the kitchen of another. I am from walks to the hardware store with one grandpa, to ice cream shops with the other. I am from a card game at my great grandparents' kitchen table.

I am from the naive childhood view that life is fair, and the grown up adult realization that it has been fairer for me than for many.

I am from the work of my foremothers of faith who showed the Church that women can be called to ministry, work which allowed me to not have to fight that same fight.

I am from systems of privilege that make my life easier and let me feel like I deserve it *and* I am from the voices of those who have helped me see my privilege and begin learning to use it for someone other than myself.

I am from the struggle of being a woman in a patriarchal system and from both the ease and shame of being so comfortable there.

I am from experiences of deep love *and* of broken relationships. I am from knowing that people are better than we can imagine *and* the disappointments that come from seeing people for who they truly are.

I am from a loving congregation that nurtured me as a child. I am from a small church in NE Missouri that called me as their pastor when I was barely an adult. I am from a congregation in SW Missouri that provided an oasis of love and kindness and discovery, that supported me in some of my deepest times of grief and celebrated with me in my greatest joys. I am from this congregation that is willing to do the continuing and challenging work of building a safe and brave community for all.

I am from the goodness of God's creation. I am from the heart of God.

Where are you from? What stories of your life have shaped who you are? What experiences have strengthened and challenged your faith? What causes you to keep coming here, to keep reaching toward God and community?

Friends, may we continue on this journey of curious discovery. May we continue to ask and to listen together. May we continue to learn more about who God is and who we are. Amen.