

Come and See
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz
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14:43

There's a wonderful cartoon from The New Yorker depicting a man sitting on a bench by himself on the subway. The caption reads, "Another way to keep an empty seat beside you on the train." And the man sitting on that empty bench on that train is wearing a t-shirt that reads, "Ask me about my Religion." Apparently no one wants to go there.

It's not always easy to talk about religion. After all, in polite conversation, or at least when you first meet someone, aren't we told that you shouldn't discuss politics or religion? We likely don't want to be pushy or insensitive or argumentative with someone who may possibly hold different views. But if we're honest with ourselves, we also don't want to be vulnerable or have people think we're misguided or unintelligent or just plain crazy. There's a certain vulnerability inherent when we get really real and say what we actually think and believe.

Just this week, we heard domestic news stories about a chemical leak that resulted in contaminated water in West Virginia, a man who received a new combination of lethal injection drugs in Ohio and it took him 10 painful minutes to die, and a huge wildfire in California accidentally started by 3 men around a campfire. We can probably easily discuss the details of the news. However, if we all had to share our opinions about humanity causing environmental disasters or the ethical questions surrounding the death penalty, that would obviously be a more difficult and tricky conversation to have.

Our most deeply-held religious beliefs are perhaps even harder to share than our political opinions. Most of us would never want to ride the T into Boston wearing a t-shirt that read "Ask me about my Religion." Most of us would probably rather share our opinions about political issues than have to speak about where we see God at work in our lives and in our world to a complete stranger. It's like Charles Campbell wrote, "That's the way of testimony. It is always a risky venture, which can offer no 'proofs' beyond what the witness has seen and heard." [1] How do you explain something you can't really prove the way folks may want you to? That's the nature of religious testimony, it's a risky venture.

A wonderful book that engages these complexities of modern faith and testimony or even that scary "evangelism" thing is Gary Dorsey's *Congregation: The Journey Back to Church*. Dorsey spent a year with a United Church of Christ congregation in Windsor, Connecticut, a historic Congregational church. The bookcover states, "In an age of exotic spiritual quests, Gary Dorsey set out in search of an American tradition. He settled in the least exotic of places--a 360-year-old Congregational church whose white clapboards and steeple looked like a picture postcard of New England." [2] I love that line, one of the least exotic of places. Basically, he spent a year with the pastors, the church staff, the Deacons, the Bible Study group, the Healing Ministry team, the Moderator, the Church Treasurer, the Sunday School, the Confirmands, among so many other members, and he attended countless committee meetings and events to get the full picture of church life.

But he also spent time with people individually to get to the heart of what people in this historic New England Congregational church actually believe. I will relate just snippets of conversations he had with three different women in the church. Joan said to him, "I am a mystic . . . I don't use the word often because people don't understand what it is and it sounds presumptuous, so I usually say I have 'mystical tendencies.' But basically I feel a very deep spiritual connection with God in the form, sometimes, of a very, very bright light, and a love that is so powerful and so deeply connected to the earth that I can't even describe it to you." [3] Another

woman, Allison, remarked, "I think deep down most people are yearning for some kind of connection, and they know they need more meaning in their lives, so they show up at church 'for their kids' or 'to make a few friends.' But they're really coming out of a lot of confusion until something happens that makes things perfectly clear." [4] And finally JoAnne confessed that she became disillusioned, saying, "People were coming to church to be entertained! And I'd think, 'This is not a village fair, folks! This is not some kind of sideshow!' . . . Church becomes a kind of town meeting rather than an acknowledgement that we're here to be in the presence of God." [5]

It took Gary Dorsey time to get folks to open up about their deepest beliefs. But their testimonies are personal and insightful, they never testified in a flashy or showy manner though, not in that church. Folks shared their religious beliefs, but in quiet moments typically away from the church itself, which is rather fascinating when you really think about it. I can talk to you about my mystical connection with God, but let's do it at my house just in case anyone may overhear my conversation at church of all places!

This is partly what we see today in the Gospel of John. John the Baptist has these huge exclamations of faith about Jesus. He proclaims, in front of Lord knows how many people, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! . . . I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him . . . And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God." [6]

But I'm more interested in what two of John's disciples do the next day—Andrew and some other guy we don't even know. The next day, Jesus walks by and John again exclaims, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" But the two disciples quietly follow Jesus. They separate from John and they go to Jesus together, but also away from all the crowds and the commotion and the shouting. Jesus turns to them and says, "What are you looking for?" and they ask him, "Where are you staying?" [7]

Okay, so let's just be sure we're all on the same page. Andrew and a buddy follow Jesus, who they were just told by their teacher, John the Baptist, is the Lamb of God. He's a big deal—Lamb of God, Son of God, Messiah—he is who they've been waiting for. Jesus turns to them and asks basically what can I do for you, what are you looking for? And all they can think to ask is, ummm where do you live?

It's so anti-climactic; it's such a wasted opportunity. You have followed the man who is supposedly the Messiah and you have his undivided attention away from everybody else. He turns to you and gives you the opportunity to ask him basically anything, it's an open-ended question, "What are you looking for?" They could have said enlightenment, meaning and purpose. Tell us what we're supposed to do with our lives, Jesus. We're looking for world peace, why bad things happen to good people, or just how many stars are really in the sky? What's up with crazy creatures like anteaters and the duck billed platypus and the jumping spider? Do you know who'll win the Super Bowl? Okay maybe they wouldn't have asked those exact questions, but come on! They take this rare opportunity and ask, "Where are you staying?"

Charles Campbell explains it like this, "Asked a momentous, life-challenging question by the one proclaimed as the Son of God, the followers reply by asking for Jesus' address." Jesus responds, I bet you anything with a smile and a twinkle in his eye. Jesus responds with 3 simple words that are just as effective today as they were back then, "Come and see." [8]

He responds with an invitation, "Come and see." Maybe their question wasn't so ridiculous after all. Because it shows that they are seeking a person, a human being like them, a teacher and a friend, not just some title that they may not even be able to understand. Because their

question shows that they are not looking to get into endless theological debates and perhaps even constantly ask him mind-numbing questions like "what is the meaning of life?" even if he would have had an answer or told them a good story to help them go deeper. They're not seeking some mysterious figure like the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Instead, they are seeking a person—to really know him, to be with him, to follow him, to come and see what Jesus has to show them.

UCC Minister Robin Meyers reminds us that, "The ministry of Jesus was, and is, and will always be about compassion—pure, unbridled, reckless compassion." [9] We see this so clearly in Jesus' response today. He responds to Andrew and his buddy with an open invitation to be part of something so much bigger than themselves. They will follow him, they will come and see, and their lives will be transformed. Campbell says that their simple question "challenges the church today to examine what we are seeking—Jesus or something else." [10]

That's why I appreciate Congregation and the responses of those women at one of the least exotic of places. They all point to something deeper than we may be able to see on the surface—one is a mystic who feels a very deep spiritual connection with God. One points to most of us yearning for some kind of connection and more meaning in our lives, even if we tell ourselves and one another that we're only here for our kids or to make a few friends. And one laments that folks may come to church for entertainment or to feel like they're at the town meeting or the village fair, but she begs us to realize that we are really here to be in God's presence. So let's live into this line of questioning today. "What are you looking for?" "Where are you staying?"
"Come and see."
"Come and see." Amen.

[1] Charles Campbell, as quoted by Kate Huey, in UCC Weekly Seeds, Focus Scripture John 1:29-42, January 19, 2014 <http://www.ucc.org/feed-your-spirit/weekly-seeds/listen-god-is-calling.html>

[2] Gary Dorsey, Congregation: The Journey Back to Church, frontcover.

[3] Gary Dorsey, Congregation: The Journey Back to Church, 201.

[4] Ibid., 208-209.

[5] Ibid., 101.

[6] John 1:29, 32, 34, NRSV.

[7] John 1:38, NRSV.

[8] John 1:39, NRSV.

[9] Robin R. Meyers, Saving Jesus from the Church: How to Stop Worshiping Christ and Start Following Jesus, 124.

[10] Charles Campbell, as quoted by Kate Huey, in UCC Weekly Seeds, Focus Scripture John 1:29-42, January 19, 2014 <http://www.ucc.org/feed-your-spirit/weekly-seeds/listen-god-is-calling.html>