

MEETING JESUS

Sermon by Rev. Patty Farr

Based on John 1:35-49

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One of the great rewards of raising my two daughters Rachel and Tara was to be able to read them wonderful children's books that we found in the library. We also loved cuddling on the couch to watch "Reading Rainbow" on PBS. I can still hear the host Levar Burton introducing new books and then saying, "But you don't have to take my word for it!" which was the cue for two or three children to offer their own priceless book reviews. The intent of this was to encourage young listeners to pick up and read books for themselves, which, of course, was the whole idea of the show!

Recalling Levar Burton's words "You don't have to take my word for it!" got me thinking. Nobody wants to take somebody else's word for something - we want to see for ourselves. When we are first being introduced to a new book or a new idea, we don't like being forced or pressured into believing or buying something just because somebody says we should. We all prefer the gentle, respectful invitation rather than the high-pressure demand.

Think about how the early disciples were first introduced to Jesus. Jesus didn't hit them over the head, saying, "If you're going to follow me, you've got to believe what I believe, turn off your minds and let me take over the controls, and strictly adhere to a rigid list of rules. If you don't, I'm sorry but you're going to fry in hell." No, he simply smiled at them and said, "Come and see." Much like Levar Burton on Reading Rainbow, Jesus was simply inviting these curious bystanders to *find out for themselves* what Jesus was talking about, what he stood for, what his teachings were about, and how he understood God. There was no forcing; there was no pressuring. There was just a friendly, open-ended invitation. That's how Jesus was when he lived on the earth - his attitude was one of openness and freedom, as if to say, "Don't believe what I tell you about God just because I said it. Live this truth

with me, try it on for size, see if it has the power to transform your life. Then you can decide whether you want to become my disciple and follow me."

It's so much fun to hear people's stories about how they first came to meet Jesus. That's one reason why the hour before worship on Sunday mornings when we have Bible Study class down in Anderson Hall is one of my favorite hours of the week. I highly recommend it to anyone who has been thinking about checking it out. As Jesus said to his disciples, so I say to you, "Come and see!" We often learn precious details about one another's faith journeys as we share our stories. For many of us, we first came to God through a loved one. E. Glenn Hinson, a retired professor of spirituality, wrote that it was his grandmother who first introduced him to God. "I can still see her sitting on the porch in her rocking chair, rocking back and forth, Bible open on her lap. Sometimes she went to sleep. But more often than not, I remember seeing tears dripping down onto the pages of her well-worn and well-marked Bible. I often asked her what was wrong. She usually replied, 'Shh! I'm just seeking a word from God'" (Companions in Christ, Participant's Book, p. 67).

Maybe you first became acquainted with God through just such a grandmother, or a neighbor, or a Sunday School teacher, or some other adult in your life. No matter how we first met Christ, it always has this quality to it - we sense we are being given more freedom, rather than less, as Christ gently invites us to a new and deeper way of life. Some people have had a kind of mystical encounter with Christ at one time or another. Maybe you have had such an experience - a vision, a message, or a strong, overpowering feeling of his presence - perhaps when you were taking Communion, or when you first held your newborn or newly adopted child, or when you were walking in the woods or quietly sitting in prayer, or when you witnessed a Maundy Thursday service. A member of our congregation gave me a picture of Jesus washing a disciple's foot, because she herself felt that she had met Christ when her foot was being washed at our Maundy Thursday service here at Emmanuel.

We all have our different ways of entering into a relationship with the Source and Center of this Universe. Some of us approach God through our struggles with theological issues and questions. Some of us encounter God through deep feelings or painful emotional wounds or addictions. Some of us have met God through a strong inner desire to heal the world or serve others in need. Some of us come upon God in our yearning to relieve suffering or to create peace or bring beauty to our corner of the world. There's no one way to meet up with the Divine Mystery that we call God.

Sometimes in our impatience to fix the world or the church or our own lives, we lose sight of Jesus. We want things to get better in our own way and on our own

timetable. When things don't go as we want or expect, we often don't recognize God. These are the times we are called to look more deeply, to listen more carefully, because of course these difficult times in our lives are God's favorite times to show up! It may be hard for us to discover Christ in the setbacks and failures that we encounter. But of course Christ wants to meet us right there, in our disappointments, our frustration, our pain and regret. In our difficult encounters with other people, in our frightening moments in the middle of the night, Christ longs to run toward us and embrace us with love at the very point of our deepest need. These moments have the potential to be life-changing, when we allow Christ to meet us in our darkness. We come to realize that God is with us through everything, and will turn even our most bitter experiences into unexpected blessing and new birth.

That's why it doesn't matter so much that we've met Jesus, but that we KEEP ON meeting him! Christ's relationship with us is not an overnight affair - it's for life. His presence in our lives has to have time to develop - days, months, years - to gradually change us from the inside out. We need a lot of patience with ourselves, because we have so many layers of resistance and fear and blindness that Christ must tunnel through to open up the windows of our souls and allow the winds of the Spirit to blow through, as we become the light-filled creations we are meant to be.

Martin Luther King, Jr. knew how essential it was to build this daily, ongoing relationship with God. In his book, Strength to Love, he wrote, "At times we may feel that we do not need God, but on the day when the storms of disappointment rage, the winds of disaster blow, and the tidal waves of grief beat against our lives, if we do not have a deep and patient faith, our emotional lives will be ripped to shreds. There is so much frustration in the world because we have relied on gods rather than God. We have genuflected before the god of science only to find that it has given us the atomic bomb, producing fears and anxieties that science can never mitigate. We have worshiped the god of pleasure only to discover that thrills play out and sensations are short-lived. We have bowed before the god of money only to learn that there are such things as love and friendship that money cannot buy and that in a world of possible depressions, stock market crashes, and bad business investments, money is a rather uncertain deity. These transitory gods are not able to save us or bring happiness to the human heart. Only God is able. It is faith in [God] that we must rediscover. With this faith we can transform bleak and desolate valleys into sunlit paths of joy and bring new light into the dark caverns of pessimism" (Strength to Love, p. 51).

You and I know something about these sunlit paths of joy of which Martin spoke. One reason we all love this church so much is the joy and the love that this community of faith has brought us. Each one of us has found Christ here so many times. But sometimes we worry about how to help our church grow. Well, let's return to the scripture in John for a moment. Look at what happened to the disciple Andrew when he first met Jesus. Andrew could tell almost immediately that his life was going to change. He wanted to share this amazing person Jesus with his brother Simon. Andrew shared from his own heart and out of his own experience. He didn't say to his brother, "Simon, your life is really messed up, YOU need to change. YOU need to get saved. YOU need to meet Jesus." Instead, he made "I" statements, which are so much more welcome and appreciated - "Simon, this amazing thing happened to me. I've met a man who I think is going to change my life, and change a lot of people's lives. I'd love for you to meet him, too." Like LeVar Burton, Andrew was saying, "You don't need to take my word for it. Come and see for yourself!"

If we are excited about what we have found here at Emmanuel, if we're amazed at all the ways Jesus has come alive for us here, we too need to gently share our faith experiences with our brothers and sisters, just as Andrew did. You might be talking enthusiastically about some event taking place at Emmanuel, and your friend might say to you, "You know, your church sounds really interesting." And just like Andrew, you can respond, "Would you like to come with me and see for yourself?"

Christ meets us everywhere, around every corner. This church is filled with God, every nook and cranny. Your own heart, your hands, your mind are all filled with God, too. Your neighbors in the pew are radiating God - can you feel it? Each Sunday we come together to celebrate our meetings with God. Like LeVar Burton, like Andrew, and like Jesus himself, let's gently invite others to the joy we've found.

Let's pray together...God, you love to arrive in our lives in all different ways, sometimes in worship, sometimes at work, sometimes when we're lying in bed and can't sleep. You meet us in our challenges, in our friendships, in our prayer times, in our hopes and dreams. You meet us in the faces of strangers, and in the people who are sitting beside us here this morning in the pew. We thank you, God, for meeting us, and we ask simply that we might go on meeting like this forever. AMEN.

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