

Beyond Belief

1 Samuel 3:1-20 John 1:43-51

Preached by Richard Bolin at Trinity United Methodist Church

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The Stockton Symphony was a pretty good professional orchestra, and I suppose it still is. The principal percussionist in 1968 was Rod Loeffler, who was also my teacher at the University of the Pacific. Dr. Wan conducted the symphony at that time. I remember him as a short man, imported from San Francisco, conducting the orchestra with an energetic flair. He liked to choose challenging music. When the score called for more than 2 or 3 percussionists, Rod Loeffler would recruit his students to fill out the section. I was privileged to play in it several times: including when they played *Balthazar's Feast* by Sir William Walton, *Daphne é Chloe* by Maurice Ravel and the *Dance Suite from West Side Story* by Leonard Bernstein. I particularly remember that one because during the most animated part of the Mambo section, the score calls for the timpanist to play double forte on three drums in a complicated cross-over pattern, using maracas to hit the drums in lieu of standard mallets. I was practicing that part in the University band room by myself one day when I went a little wide with the maraca in my right hand and shattered it on the metal edge of the drum. A thousand tiny beads scattered to the four corners of the room. No one was there to witness it, though I did have to explain how the maraca got broken. That was not my most embarrassing moment as a percussionist.

The very first time I played with the Stockton Symphony was early in my freshman year, and the piece was Mussorgsky's *Ten Pictures from an Exhibition*. The ten movements are each an interpretation of a picture Mussorgsky saw at a museum one day. The first movement is called the Gnome, and I was playing cymbals. Now this was a pretty big step-up from a few months before when I was playing in the Orange High School band. And these cymbals were bigger than anything my high school owned. These were a major set of concert cymbals - 20 inches in diameter - heavy, big cymbals! These were not 12 inch marching cymbals for use on a football field or in a parade. These were **concert** cymbals for loud crashes at dramatic climaxes, and after the crash the cymbals can be held high, facing out to let the vibrations resonate all the way to the back of the concert hall.

Near the very beginning of The Gnome movement the score calls for a cymbal crash. At this point in my limited music education I had never heard Ten Pictures from an Exhibition, but I prided myself on being a good sight-reader. I somewhat awkwardly pick-up this set of cymbals and had them ready. The conductor gave the downbeat. The orchestra played a short, fast double triplet figure: Cha-ba-da-ba-cha-ba-dump ... CRRAASSSHHH! I hit it right on the money, the cymbals resonated across the room, and Dr. Wan, who up until this time seemed like a rather nice man, stumbled off the podium with a look of surprised horror on his face. I don't remember what he said to me, but suddenly I

did not feel like a professional. It's staccato! Short! Not Cha-ba-da-ba-cha-ba-dump ... CRASH!, but Cha-ba-da-ba-cha-ba-dump ... CHINK!

So we did it again. Now I had the technique down as to how to make these big concert cymbals resonate - but what I had never tried was to crash them loud and then make them stop resonating. I discovered there was one way to do it. You hit them hard and then immediately bury the razor thin edges of the cymbals in your armpits. It took me a few times to get it right - to realize that the only way to silence these things was to just take the hit. I didn't get it right the second time, or the third time we did it over for my benefit. As far as Dr. Wan was concerned a symphony rehearsal was not the place percussionists were supposed to be getting lessons. "Are you a percussionist?" he wanted to know. "Has this man ever played cymbals before?" I was too scared to say anything. Rod Loeffler answered for me. "Yes, he's a percussionist. He'll get it right." I finally did, and I even got to come back and play the Timpani on Bernstein's *West Side Story Dance Suite*, managing not to shatter any maracas during the performance.

Have you ever felt like the lone incompetent in a room full of experts?

I wonder if some people feel that way in Church - thinking to themselves, "Am I out of my element here? Do I need more training to be here? Everyone else seems to have grown-up going to Church. They all know when to stand-up and when to sit down. They are singing songs I never hear on the radio. They know that "Our Father" prayer by heart. That preacher can tell I'm new and he's going to give me a test. He's going to single me out in front of all these people - ask me what I believe, and I am not sure how to answer."

In the reading from the Gospel of John we have a wonderful example of how to invite someone to Church. Jesus is recruiting disciples and Philip answers the call. Then Philip finds his friend Nathanael. "Hey, Nate. Come on! We've found the one we've been waiting for. He's Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth."

Nathanael says, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" And we wonder, what does Nathanael know about Nazareth that we don't. Whatever it is, Nathanael is a skeptic from the start. But Philip takes the comment in stride. We should note how Philip did **not** respond. "Now listen, Nathanael! Didn't I just say this is the guy Moses and the prophets wrote about? Let me go over the chapter and verse with you. That's a pretty insulting way to respond to your old friend, anyway. How gullible do you think I am? Do you suppose I go running after any self-proclaimed Messiah that comes to the lakeshore? And by the way, I know several good things that have come out of Nazareth. Don't be a bigot!"

But Philip did not argue with Nathanael. "Come and see." "Hey, Nate, just check him out!" Philip did not have to sell Jesus. Philip's invitation was confident and authentic.

Being a Christian is not about believing the right things. It is about following Jesus. The invitation is simple: "Come and See." Walk with Jesus on this path. Live the way you see Jesus living.

Three famous preacher/pastor/theologian type-persons all arrived at the Gate of Heaven at the same time, confident of immediate entry. You can name whatever three famous preacher/pastor/theologian persons from whatever faith traditions come to mind. They discover that entry requires passing an oral exam with Jesus, himself. But not to worry, because these are, after all, the pre-eminent preacher/pastor/theologian type persons of the present age. So the first one enters the exam room with Jesus and the other two sit in the waiting room. Time passes. The first one comes out with a shocked expression on his face. "I didn't pass," he confesses.

The second famous preacher/pastor/theologian type person goes into the exam room. The same thing happens. She comes back out with slumped shoulders. "I didn't pass."

Then the third famous preacher/pastor/theologian type person enters the room, and this is of course the most learned and orthodox theologian of the three. He is in the room for a long time. Finally, Jesus comes out of the room and says to the other two, "I didn't pass."

Being a Christian is not about believing the right things. It is about following Jesus. The Christian life is about the walk more than it is about the talk. It is a given that it will include stumbles and mistakes and some loud crashes where there was supposed to be just a choked chink. But pick up the instrument and try again, this time paying a little more attention to the conductor, and eventually we will get it right.

Many persons long for an experience of God. And folks are looking lots of places besides the Church to find God, as well they should, for God is not confined to an institution or a particular faith community. But hey! Come and see! There is more to the Church than organization. There is more to tradition than stale old stuff. There is ancient wisdom in treasured scriptures. There is authentic spirit in loving community. There is Good News in the proclamation of God's grace. There is meaning in mission. There is power when people are in prayer together. Let us be the first to acknowledge that experiences of the Holy are not confined to the Church - but it is a pretty good place to start.

When Philip invited Nathanael to "come and see", clearly he thought that Jesus would make a wonderful difference in Nathanael's life. But reading between the lines a bit, I think that Philip also thought Nathanael had something



"In His Image" by
William Zdinak*

to offer Jesus. Perhaps becoming aware that Jesus was forming a group of disciples, Philip thought to himself, "I know just the person." And when Jesus sees Nathanael he pays him an immediate compliment. "Here is a man with no deceit."

When young Martin Luther King, Jr. was finishing his Ph.D. in social ethics at Boston University School of Theology, he wasn't sure what he was going to do next. Most persons who go to seminary get a Master of Divinity degree and then become pastors. A few stay in school for 2 or 3 more years to work on a Ph.D., usually with the intention of pursuing an academic career teaching at a university. With his Ph.D. completed, Martin Luther King, Jr. seriously considered becoming a teacher of theology, with an emphasis in Christian social ethics. But a Baptist church in the south invited him to be their pastor, and God put Dr. King to work in the place where he needed to be.

When Philip invited Nathanael to come and see Jesus, he wasn't just thinking of Nathanael as a person with needs that Jesus could meet. Both Philip and Jesus saw in Nathanael a person who would answer a call to be in ministry - who had a life to devote to God's mission, which is the most important endeavor in the world.

Some of God's best people are not in the Church, yet. You know who they are. They are your best friends and your favorite relatives. If you sat down to talk with them about what gives life meaning, they would have wisdom to share. If you invited them to come to Church with you they might want to know if anything good happens at the crossroads of Los Osos Valley Road and Pine Avenue.

Hey, come and see. We promise not to make you feel like an incompetent seeker in the midst of a room full of experts - because that is not the way we see the world. Come and see. You might meet God. Maybe if you join us in the journey, God will become more real to the both of us. Let us go beyond belief, beyond the talk, and do the walk. Amen.

*The painting by William Zdinak is titled "In His Image." The faces of persons shown within the face of Christ, some famous, some not, are chosen at random. "It really doesn't matter which persons are depicted," writes the artist. "We are 'all one in Christ' as St. Paul has told us. Hurting one, we hurt all; helping one, we help all. That is the idea behind - 'In His Image'."