

"COME AS YOU ARE"

July 28, 2019

Matthew 6:25-34

Jesus called his disciples saying, "Come as you are, for you are enough." The disciples doubted themselves, for they were simple people and could not see their value before God and this Teacher. Jesus said, in essence, "Nonsense. You have as much value and beauty as the birds of the air and the wildflowers in the field. Believe in yourselves. Believe in me as God believes in you." Hear what Jesus is saying to the people in Matthew's Gospel, the sixth Chapter, beginning with the 25th verse:

If you decide for God, living a life of God-worship, it follows that you don't fuss about what's on the table at mealtimes or whether the clothes in your closet are in fashion. There is far more to your life than the food you put in your stomach, more to your outer appearance than the clothes you hang on your body. Look at the birds, free and unfettered, not tied down to a job description, careless in the care of God. And you count far more to God than birds.

"Has anyone by fussing in front of the mirror ever gotten taller by so much as an inch? All this time and money wasted on fashion—do you think it makes that much difference? Instead of looking at the fashions, walk out into the fields and look at the wildflowers. They never primp or shop, but have you ever seen color and design quite like it? The ten best-dressed men and women in the country look shabby alongside them.

"If God gives such attention to the appearance of wildflowers—most of which are never even seen—don't you think God will attend to you, take pride in you, do the best for you? What I'm trying to do here is to get you to relax, to not be so preoccupied with *getting*, so you can respond to God's *giving*. People who don't know God and the way God works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how God works. Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions.

Don't worry about missing out. You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met.

"Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don't get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes.

Here ends the reading. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.

What was Jesus *thinking* when he went around gathering up those who would be his disciples? He did not appear to be a deft strategic planner. I don't see in the Bible or other resources any master chart of his for whom to pick, how many to choose, or what skills each of them needed to possess. Jesus didn't appear to gather unto him persons of any means, though he picked up a few patrons along the way who provided the occasional meal, dust-off, and straw bed for him and his entourage.

None of his disciples could provide horses or donkeys. They had no servants or tents, and none of the disciples had any particular social or religious status. What gives? How is this any way to plan, staff, and fund a revolution?

You probably puckered your jaws a bit when I suggested Jesus was not a strategic planner. We like to think that Jesus had a purpose for everything he did! This is because we have been taught to place Jesus high up on the mantle of our Christian fireplaces so that we can admire him, mostly from the comfort of across the room.

We believe that Jesus was God-inspired. I think most of us will agree on this point. Some of us give him even more credence than that. Most of us, I will venture, were taught that Jesus was the true flesh-and-blood Son of God, born of the Virgin Mary. That construction has Jesus as almost-God, more than a man but less than the Creator, a brother to the Holy Spirit, divine.

That is Matthew's view, and today's *is* his scripture passage. But Mark, the first Gospel writer, has another view. In his writing, Jesus is a man. No virgin birth, no angels singing at his cradle, no wise men or shepherds leaving their flocks to ooh and ahh over him. He's a man who is on fire for God. He is lit up with the power of the Holy Spirit and he has a singular mission.

He believes that love of God means love for one's neighbor. He believes that the religious teaching and practice of the day obscures God's love and riddles it with conditions. He believes that it is Good News that God loves us just as we are, and in celebration of love, we are called to love others in the same way. That is his "Why," his reason for being. It is a simple message, though he says it in some rather mystical ways. His parables and his speeches, his unconventional consorting with marginalized persons, and his defiance of religious authority all make his message hard for our ears to hear.

Master strategist? Common man divinely inspired? Foolhardy visionary who was hell-bent on self-destruction for a theology that was

largely ignored during his lifetime? Theories abound; treatise writers have killed many trees boldly proclaiming their universal truths. Maybe we have a few scholars who resonate with us: Marcus Borg and Jon Dominic Crossan of the Jesus Project; Walter Brueggemann, Old Testament Scholar; Robin Meyers, Progressive Theologian; Phyllis Trible, Feminist Theologian; and/or one of my favorites, Practical Theologian Barbara Brown Taylor. Perhaps you learned John Calvin in a Presbyterian upbringing, John Wesley if you grew up Methodist, Martin Luther if you were Lutheran, or Pope John Paul II if you grew up around the turn of the Millennium as a Catholic. I have an old friend who can come up with a hundred more, and I guarantee he has read them all.

A hundred, a thousand, one or two, it's all the same; it's all conjecture and none of it is provable. Except by you, except in your own life and faith.

Jesus was a man of mystery. What he was thinking when he chose commoners to be his disciples we cannot know. Why he hung around with women who could produce no pedigree, with men who were dirt poor, uneducated, unsophisticated, and unskilled—all of this is beyond our understanding.

Why he took on the Pharisees and the Romans so directly we are not sure. If it was a plan, then it was a suicidal one. It had no chance of success or longevity.

Joe Narracci and I had a conversation this past week about what it means to be in covenant here at UCC Parker Hilltop. He gave me permission to share parts of it with you. But before I get into that, let me tell you a parable based in today's film, *The Greatest Showman*:

There was a man who owned a circus. All of the performers in his troupe were misfits, persons who had physical deformities or quirks. These were known as the Oddities. The man was unconcerned if they were talented, for he knew their attraction was not talent, but appearance. He told them, "Come as you are," and I will make you famous.

The Oddities were hesitant to come out of their closets. They had been hidden away by their embarrassed parents, denied education and socialization. They did not trust this man and though others thought *them* to be strange, they looked upon *him* as the oddest of all.

The townspeople were drawn to the circus by their curiosity. They paid for tickets and warily stepped inside to see what spectacle was hidden behind the doors. Others protested the circus and demanded that it be closed down.

The man gave the Oddities a community—a family-- and they gave him their love and devotion. He was successful, but he could not see it. He wanted to be socially rich; he wanted to be accepted by the upper crust. He forgot what God had called him to be. He forgot that God called to him, "Come as you are, for you are enough."

Joe and I were talking about this idea of "covenant" and how it differs from "membership." We were talking about the unique value of UCC Parker Hilltop as a church community that welcomes everyone and

believes that God loves all people unconditionally. This conversation took place in the context of what it means to be a covenantal partner in the church.

We say, "Come as you are, for you are enough." What does that mean? We went back and forth with our ideas. Joe is concerned that we do what we say and welcome *everyone, unconditionally*. I agree that our church is called to be that place of extravagant welcome, but I think Spirit also calls for our *investment* here as disciples, not merely followers, of Christ.

By way of illustration, I invite you to consider a public park, say Challenger Regional Park on Lincoln Avenue here in Parker. This park is free to everyone; everyone is welcome to come and enjoy what it has to offer. Follow the signs and be led to the Rec Center, the ball fields, the playground, what have you.

Recently some of us from church went there to watch one of our youngsters play baseball. We took into the park our lawn chairs, a beverage, and sunglasses, and for 90 minutes or so we enjoyed the game and each other's company. We were church family supporting one of our own. It didn't cost us anything, and the investment in time and emotion and gasoline was minimal.

The investment of that boy's *family* is much larger. Do you have any idea these days what it costs for your child to play 12 baseball games, to own a bat and glove, his or her uniform, lessons, traveling

tournaments, and sponsorship? It's a staggering sum. Yet, the parents see value in their youngster being involved in organized sports, and so they pay the cost willingly. They *invest* in their child.

Parents give up their time—a *lot* of time. Trips to and time spent at practices, batting cages, private lessons, sporting goods stores, playing catch in the front yard, the games themselves, laundry, scraped knees, pizza after the game, the list goes on. Parents invest their time heavily in extracurricular opportunities for their children—sports, music, drama, spelling bees, scouting, all of it.

They also invest their talent. Some parents serve as coaches; others make food, mend torn jerseys, drive kids everywhere they need to be, help the kids stretch, oil gloves, dig mud out of cleats, you name it. Parents with a kid in sports or other activity invest their talent.

And they invest their money. I handled divorce cases where prodigy children cost upwards of \$1500 per month in lessons, fees, trainers, doctors, competitions, and equipment, more if they traveled for tournaments or try-outs.

We spectators got to go to the game for free. The parents and the child invested much. "It's the difference between followers and disciples, and you want to make disciples," said Joe. He is right. Covenant is about discipleship, not about convenience. It's about investment, not about spectator sports. We welcome all, but we expect much. Being Christian today is not for everyone, for we can't afford to

sit back on our laurels and let others play the game. Covenant is a higher calling than simply showing up at the public park with a lawn chair and a Coke.

Jesus was all about investment. When he said to his chosen disciples, "Follow me," most of them protested that they had no obvious skills for ministry, that they were not good enough. He said, "Come as you are, for you are enough," and that meant they already had within them everything that was needed for him to make them into his disciples.

He taught them and he scolded them. He led them and he blessed them. He left them to go off by himself at times in frustration, but he always came back and broke the bread of community with them.

This was different than how he was with his followers. His followers were not his disciples. No investment was required of them. Anyone and everyone were invited to sit on the hillside and listen to him preach. When he broke the bread and blessed the fish, they all ate their fill for free. There's nothing in the Gospels to suggest that the disciples went through the crowds with an offering plate asking for donations for the ministry of Jesus.

Nope. It was a free ride. "Bring your lawn chairs, a cold beverage, and your sunglasses, and enjoy the show, folks!" Jesus was an Oddity and he was, if nothing else, entertaining. Most of the

followers came and went. They invested nothing—no time, no service, no money.

Some texts say there were thousands on the hillsides. More likely, there were dozens, or maybe just a few. No matter; they were not disciples, by their own choice. Some were changed by his words and his witness, but most went their own way once the performance was over.

Jesus tells us in this passage that we don't have to look any certain way or dress to the nines or impress anyone else with our cars or our hairstyles or our houses or our bank accounts. We are directed to the birds of the air and their lightness of being. We are directed to the wildflowers of the fields and their natural, imperfect, beauty.

Jesus tells us not to worry about all the trappings of this life, not to follow after all we *think* others expect us to be. Instead, he says, we are to invest in God, in God-Alive and in all God wants for us in response to God's unconditional love. God wants our *time*. God wants our *service*. God wants our doors to remain flung open wide for the people who need our authentic welcome but who have yet to meet us. That takes our *investment*.

We exist as UCC Parker Hilltop because we believe the Good News of Jesus Christ that God's unconditional love, through the power of the Holy Spirit, gives meaning and purpose to our lives. We have

invested in this message, because we are disciples of Christ, not merely followers.

P.T. Barnum, an American icon, forgot for a time that his value was in his unconditional love for the unlovable. He forgot his *Why*, that he believed there was value in every person regardless of their physical attributes and oddities. He nearly lost everything that gave him purpose and meaning in life; he nearly forgot that God had called him to invest in his own ministry of love and acceptance. When he regained his purpose, his identity, his *Why*, he regained his life.

Jesus told the people, "What I'm trying to do here is to get you to relax, to not be so preoccupied with *getting*, so you can respond to *God's giving*." So I ask you, people of God, Disciples of Jesus Christ, brothers and sisters of the God-Alive Holy Spirit, what do you think should be the first message we put out to our neighbors on our new digital lighted sign? Let me know, will you? And then,

May It Be So.