

“Where Are You From?”

Valley Presbyterian Church – August 6, 2023

10th Sunday after Pentecost

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

John 1:35-51

Having been born and lived my first eighteen years in Louisville, Kentucky, I chose to attend college at Colgate University, located more than a twelve-hour drive away in upstate New York. When I was a first-year student there – and one of only two students from Kentucky – it was not uncommon for people to hear my southern accent and ask me, “where are you from?” I even remember one person saying, “I have friends from Alabama, do you know them?”

The place where we are from has a lot to do with who we are. Where I am from, you always hold open the door and grits are often served on the side. Where I come from, proper hospitality is important, meaning the silver julip cups are polished and making sure the sweet tea is brewed. But I also come from a place where schools are ranked near the bottom of national rankings. In Kentucky, there actually is a town named Hazard where it wouldn’t at all be surprising to see two brothers driving around in an orange car with a confederate flag painted on the top.

As the first of four questions in this “I’ve Been Meaning to Ask...” worship series, “Where Are You From?” is an important thing to ask. But why you ask is also important. Is it to create a deeper, common relationship; or is to exclude, to perpetuate differences?

Let’s listen to Dr. Raj Nadella speak about this question.

“Where are you from?” Great question. Let me begin on a personal note by saying that I came to the U.S. more than twenty years ago from India. You won’t be surprised that in those 20 plus years, I have been asked the question, “Where are you from?” in numerous settings. Coffee shops, shopping malls, seminaries, and so on.

Interestingly, though, I used to be asked this question back in India as well. After high school, I moved to a different state to pursue my education. In India, moving to a different state meant living among people who spoke a different language, ate slightly different food, and even looked a bit different. And so, at

times, when I was out and about, people would ask me this question, “Where are you from?”

Without a doubt, I’ve been asked this question way more times in the last 20 years than before that. I’ve always had this urge to respond to this question by asking them a question. “Where are you coming from?”

I’ve always been curious about why someone might be curious about me. Are they asking me questions in order to connect with me on a deeper level? Or, are they trying to treat me as an outsider? What do they hope to do with the knowledge they acquire about me? Will they use it as a foundation to build common, mutual spaces? Or, will they use it to exclude me? Put me in a box?

Why you ask is important. How you ask is equally important. The English word curiosity has the connotation of nosiness, intrusiveness. But the Latin root, ‘curiosus,’ means ‘diligence,’ ‘careful.’ And a related Latin word, ‘cura,’ means care. Curiosity, then, is about asking questions with care and diligence.

In the story about Jesus and Philip and Nathanael, Philip is excited about meeting Jesus; so excited that he wanted to introduce Nathanael to Jesus. Nathanael’s first response was, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip says, “Come and see.” And Nathanael did. And Nathanael, when he spent time with Jesus, was absolutely blown away by what he had learned – and unlearned – about Jesus, and about Nazareth.

Nazareth was a town set in the heart of Galilee, a region populated by Jews and Gentiles of several different ethnicities. It was a diverse area. But the Jewish people of Judea often looked down on their kinsmen in Galilee for being lax in regard to religious traditions and more likely to intermarry with Gentiles. Judeans saw Galilean Jews as less pure, if not impure.¹

The point of the story is that curiosity is about being willing to engage others with care and respect for the relationship. We often form opinions about people before we get to know them, as if they cannot possibly be the exception to the rule – either positively or negatively. We place value in externals without asking about who someone is or what they had to overcome or how these experiences might have affected them.

¹ Thomas Slater from *WorkingPreacher.com*

Curiosity is contagious. Andrew, who follows Jesus, introduces him to his brother Simon. Philip introduces Jesus to Nathanael, who wishes to know if anything good can come out of Nazareth. “Come and see” says Philip. The subtext is, “Don’t arrive at premature conclusions about anyone, or otherize them based on insufficient knowledge.”

One after the other, these men follow Jesus; despite the fact that none of them has a full picture of who Jesus is. There is something compelling about Jesus which brings all of these different people together on a common path. As the disciples come together, each with their own experiences and particularities, a patchwork of understanding of Jesus is pieced together.

Today’s artwork, titled “Come and See,” is a digital painting by Lauren Wright Pittman. In this image, the artist draws Jesus’ followers each wearing a pattern representing their identity and their understanding of who Jesus is. John the Baptist’s clothes contain patterns of his unusual diet – locusts and honey – as well as droplets of water, representing his baptism of Jesus. The unnamed disciple identifies Jesus as Rabbi, and so his clothes are patterned with scrolls. Andrew identifies Jesus as Messiah, or anointed One, so his clothes are patterned with jars of oil. Andrew, Simon, and Philip are all from a fishing town called Bethsaida. Each of their clothes contains a reference to their hometown. Andrew with waves of water, Simon Peter with a swirling fish, and Philip with fish scales. The fish on Simon’s clothes swim around rocks which reference his new name, Peter. Philip refers to Jesus as one “about whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote.” His clothes are patterned with the stone tablets etched with the Ten Commandments. Nathanael’s clothes are patterned with the very fig branches Jesus saw him under.

Jesus clothes include the colors of all the followers’ clothes and his halo contains imagery referencing the many attributes the disciples use to describe who Jesus is. Jesus, half in the frame, cannot be fully known or contained by our patchwork understandings.

How do we – as people from particular places and each having had our own experiences – cultivate a deeper curiosity that grants a fuller understanding of others; especially those who may look, dress, and think differently from us? It requires the investment of sufficient time and resources to learn about them, a commitment to unlearning prior assumptions when needed, and a healthy curiosity that engages others while respecting their space.

So, if you really want to know where I am from, you should be willing to listen to all the stories and experiences about the many places where I have been. And if we want to better know one another and, therefore, care for and respect each other, then we need a healthy curiosity for and about each other; to take the time to ask good questions and then listen attentively to learn – or to unlearn – more about who we are as this particular patchwork of God's people. Amen.