

**“Come and See”**  
**John 1:43-51; Genesis 28:10-17**

Malcolm Gladwell’s book, Outliers: The Story of Success, debuted as number one on the New York Times Bestseller list in December of 2008. In this still popular book, Gladwell wants us to look at the world a little differently. Specifically, he contradicts the general assumption that those who are successful achieved this success on their own.

For instance, the first example he uses concerns professional hockey players in Canada. He discovers that one’s birth date is the best predictor of success. The reason is the way children’s hockey leagues are structured in Canada. There exist specific beginning and cut off birthdates for players. The majority of professional Canadian hockey players were born in January, February, and March, with January occupying the top step. Gladwell believes that is because the January players are bigger and more physically mature than those born later in the year. Because of their superior physical characteristics the earlier born players are chosen for the all star teams, which gives them more practice and competition against better opponents. And this phenomena continues to multiply through the years as these boys are repeatedly chosen for teams with more practice time and more game situations, while their younger counterparts receive fewer opportunities to enhance their physical skills.

There are fascinating chapters on other highly successful people, such as Bill Gates, who we discover in high school was provided a unique opportunity of constant access to a computer terminal when few existed. Gladwell acknowledges that these successful people are bright, motivated, and ambitious. But so are millions of other people. Success is not determined so much by intelligence, or even ambition, but by opportunity. And if this is true, he asks, can we not take steps to give more and more people those opportunities?

“Nathanael said to Philip, ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’”

Nathanael reacts to Jesus by evaluating success in the customary pattern of his day. Everyone knew God’s will, especially God’s Messiah, couldn’t come out of a back water town like Nazareth. Nazareth contained somewhere between 200-400 people. It was economically dependent on Sepphoris, the one time capital of the Palestinian province of Galilee. Nazareth is never even mentioned in the entire Old Testament.

So, when Philip approaches Nathanael and says to him, “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth,” Nathanael without hesitation or forethought expresses the common bias of his day, “What? Are you kidding me? Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

Now, the really funny part is that John 21:2 tells us that Nathanael was from Cana in Galilee. It wasn’t like he came from Rome or Alexandria or Tarsus, the great intellectual centers of the ancient world. Rather, he hailed from a village just down the road. But somehow, in the commonly accepted Galilean pecking order of towns and villages, Nazareth resided at the bottom.

Otherwise, Nathanael seeks to understand Jesus in terms of his physical and geographical origins. He places Jesus in the context of his own intellectual and religious parameters in order to determine who Jesus is and what he can do. Like us with our shared perceptions that professional hockey players possess superior physical skills or

Bill Gates was smarter than all those around him, Nathanael believes Jesus can't be much because he comes from the intellectually starved town of Nazareth.

This passage reminded me how often I make judgments on theological and spiritual issues driven by the context of my physical and intellectual parameters. I believe it is just as hard for us to accept Jesus as it was for Nathanael. Like Nathanael, we say to ourselves, "Well, Jesus lived 2000 years ago in an ancient middle eastern society. He never even left Israel. He didn't have a wife and children, died at thirty-three, so he didn't have to worry about saving for retirement. He doesn't understand the problems, events, obstacles that confront us 21<sup>st</sup> century people.

"When he calls us to forgive others, the trauma that is inflicted by someone who sues us, or divorces us, or maligns us with gossip, he must not comprehend that pain, and need for retaliation.

"And this whole idea that people can change, that the love of God can turn them around from agents of hate and harm, that they can become new people through the love of Christ just tells me Jesus never heard what Michael Cogdill reports every night on the six o'clock news.

"Or, the idea we should give not just ten percent of our income, but be as generous as possible to God's work has to come from a man who never had a mortgage, 401k, or kid at Clemson.

"And this biblical idea of a preference for the poor, that the Christian is especially called to aid the sick, the hungry, the infirm, obviously means Jesus didn't understand the difficulty of health insurance or people's laziness."

When we look at how we respond to Jesus' words and directions, so often we discover that we are asking the same question as Nathanael: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

A pastor was greeting people at the door after the service when a woman enthusiastically shook his hand and said, "Pastor, that was a great sermon!"

Flushed with pride, but wanting to appear humble, the pastor said, "Oh, it wasn't me. I have to give credit to the Lord."

To which the woman replied, "It wasn't that good!"

When we look at what Jesus says he can do, do we silently respond, "He isn't that good"?

"Nathanael said to Philip, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.'"

It is difficult to talk people into being Christian. Mostly because, as we just noted, it is counterintuitive. What the world deems as appropriate behavior is contrary to the Christian gospel. We make decisions based on what is generally acceptable, what strikes us as logical. And when the faith runs counter to that, all we can really be told is, "Come and see."

Philip knew he couldn't talk Nathanael out of believing nothing good could come out of Nazareth. Some commentators think Nathanael's comment voices a proverb or common saying about Nazareth's insignificance. Whichever it is, Nathanael cannot see Jesus beyond his geographical upbringing. So, Philip responds using the only method possible to break down this barrier: "Come and see."

And that is what this scripture, Jesus, says to us today: "Come and see."

Don't believe that forgiving others will liberate you and even free you to forgive yourself? "Come and see."

Don't believe that the gospel of Jesus Christ can radically change people, turn them 180 degrees morally and spiritually, turn around an alcoholic, drug addict, bigot, miser, murderer, or rapist? "Come and see."

Don't believe tithing, giving ten percent of your income, will liberate you from the love of money? "Come and see."

Don't believe fifteen minutes a day of prayer and scripture reading will renew your souls? "Come and see."

Don't believe God can change you? "Come and see."

Has nothing good come out of Nazareth for you and me because we have not really tried it? Maybe it is time to "come and see."

A wise school teacher sent a note home to all parents on the first day of school. It read: "If you promise not to believe everything your child says happens at school, I'll promise not to believe everything he or she says happens at home."

If we question whether the love of Christ can really do what the scripture proclaims, we do not have to believe what others say, we can "come and see" for ourselves.

"Come and see."

Nathanael followed Philip's advice. He went to see Jesus and it changed his life. Today, we come to partake of the sacrament. It reminds us of the offer of love and forgiveness Christ presents to us. It is an offer that contradicts much of what the world says is good, right, successful and smart. The Christian will find himself or herself at odds with much of society's wisdom. But the sacrament is an opportunity to "come and see." Within this ancient ritual resides the Spirit of Christ, calling us to an existence of love, sacrifice, forgiveness and obedience — all those elements that feel confining until we discover they actually liberate us.

This morning, have you really and truly tried living like Jesus? Or, are you and I certain nothing good can come out of Nazareth?

"Come and see."

Ludwig L. Weaver, Jr.  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
October 4, 2009