

# Are You the One?

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The Community Church of Sebastopol  
Launch Sunday, September 8, 2013

## John 1: 43-51

The late, great preacher and visionary youth minister, Michael Yaconelli, shared this story: “Every month the youth group from our church visited Holcomb Manor, a local nursing home, to hold church services for the residents. Daryl, a reluctant youth group volunteer, did not like nursing homes. For a long time he had avoided these monthly services. But when a flu epidemic depleted the group’s adult leadership, he agreed to help with the next month’s service...as long as he did not have to be part of the program.

The Sunday of the service, Daryl felt awkward and out of place. He leaned by himself against the back wall. Just as the service finished and Daryl was thinking about a quick exit, someone grabbed his hand. Startled, he looked down and saw a very old, frail and obviously lonely man in a wheelchair. What could Daryl do but hold the man’s hand? The man’s mouth hung open and his face held no expression. Daryl doubted whether he could hear or see anything.

But as everyone began to leave, a moment Daryl had been looking forward to all afternoon, he realized he didn’t want to leave the old man alone. Caught somewhat off-guard by his strong feelings, Daryl leaned over and whispered, ‘I’m sorry, but I have to leave. But I will be back...I promise.’ The man squeezed Daryl’s hand and let go. Then, inexplicably, he heard himself say to the man, ‘I love you.’ ‘Where did that come from?’ he thought. ‘What’s the matter with me?’”

Daryl returned the next month and the month after that. Each time it was the same. Daryl would stand in the back, the man would grab his hand, Daryl would say he had to leave, the man would squeeze his hand, and Daryl would say softly, “I love you, Mr. Leak.” (he had learned that the man’s name was Oliver Leak) As the months went on, Daryl would find himself actually looking forward to his visit with his aged friend.

But one Sunday afternoon, Oliver was not there. Daryl was not too concerned at first, because it often took the attendants a long time to wheel everyone out. But halfway into the service, Daryl became alarmed. He went to the nurses’ station and asked about Mr. Leak. The nurse asked him to follow her and led him to room 27. Oliver lay in his bed, eyes closed, his breathing uneven. Daryl, age forty, had never seen someone dying, but he knew his friend was near death. He walked to the side of the bed and grabbed Oliver’s hand, but there was no response. He stayed with him until the youth group was getting ready to leave. Then he stood, squeezed Oliver’s hand for what he feared was the last time, and said as he had said so many times, “I’m sorry, Oliver, I have to go. I love you.’ And he felt a squeeze. Oliver had responded. Now sobbing, Daryl stumbled toward the door, trying to regain his composure.

He did not see the young woman standing there, and almost bumped into her. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said, ‘I didn’t see you.’

“‘It’s all right,’ she said, ‘I was actually waiting to see you. I’m Oliver’s granddaughter. He’s dying, you know.’

“‘Yes, I know.’

“‘I wanted to meet you,’ she said, and then she shared a story. ‘My grandfather and I have always been very close. When the doctors said he was dying, I came immediately. They said he couldn’t talk, but he’s been talking to me. Not much, but I know what he’s saying. Last night he woke up. His eyes were bright and alert. He looked straight at me and said, ‘Please say goodbye to Jesus for me.’ Then he laid back down and closed his eyes.

“I whispered to him, ‘Grandpa, I don’t need to say goodbye to Jesus; you’re going to be with him soon, and you can tell him hello.’

“Grandpa struggled to open his eyes again, this time his face lit up with a mischievous smile as he said as clearly as I am talking to you, ‘But Jesus comes to see me every month and he may not know I’ve gone.’ Then he closed his eyes and hasn’t spoken since.”

“I told the nurse what he said and she told me about you, how you come every month and hold Grandpa’s hand. So I wanted to thank you for him, for me...and, well, I never thought of Jesus as being as chubby and bald as you, but I imagine that Jesus is very glad to have had you be mistaken for him. I know Grandpa is. Thank you.’ Oliver Leak died peacefully the next morning.” Mistaken for Jesus...or what it a mistake?

“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” asks Nathanael. Dusty, poor, forgotten, out of the way Nazareth - messiahs don’t come from places like Nazareth. There was no need for him to actually meet Jesus because he knew – as everyone knew – that this Jesus could be nothing more than a simple Jew raised by simple peasant parents in an insignificant village in Galilee. The Messiah would certainly be of more prominent parentage and come from a more significant town. In response, all Philip can say is, “Come and see...come and see.”

I think of us. I think of Nathanael. What would he say about us? Can anything good come out of Sebastopol? We are just folks, trying to get by day by day, swimming as fast as we can to keep our heads above water. I suspect we don’t often see God’s finger print anywhere in the dust of our daily busyness; hear God’s call amidst the clamor and clutter of our lives. And yet, if a reluctant follower like Daryl – chubby and bald - can be mistaken for Jesus, maybe you and I can as well.

No way Daryl wanted to go with the church youth to that convalescent home. No way Nathanael wanted to go with Philip to see Jesus. But our text makes it quite clear that Jesus is not in this work by himself. He is not a solo act. Whatever he wants to get done in the world, whatever changes he wants to make, he chooses not

to do it alone. As Daryl rather reluctantly and surprisingly discovered, Jesus invites a group of ordinary, everyday people – people like you and me – to do it with him. Could you be the one?

It's only September, but my mind leaps ahead – or back – to our Christmas Eve services. Remember what it is like when, at the end of the service, we turn out all the lights and begin to light our candles? At first the church is eerily dark and silent, with just one fragile candle burning on the communion table. But then the light gradually spreads as each of you lights the candle of the person next to you. By the time we have finished "Silent Night" the entire sanctuary is warmly aglow, all your beautiful faces reflected in the candlelight. I think we can take that as a parable for how Jesus does what he has to do. Jesus, the Light of the World, illuminates one person at a time until all of our lights finally shine together and the whole world is full of Christ's light. How do you suppose we will be called to shine in the year to come. Again, are you the one?

And one final point. Jesus goes to Andrew, Andrew goes to Nathanael, and Nathanael then seeks out Jesus. In our recent all-church listening process, the vast majority of people who responded to why they first came to this church and why they keep coming to this church pointed to an invitation they received from a church member. They first came to Sunday worship because of someone they knew. A few – but just a few – mentioned the sermons (I never was a fan of surveys!), but a vast majority came because of some personal contact. I once heard it said that wherever you go, there goes the church of Jesus Christ. For so many of us, somebody lived the story of Jesus in such a way that finally, like Nathanael, we just had to see for ourselves. How are we going to live the story in the coming year? Whose life might we touch, perhaps without even realizing it?

Some of you have heard this story told by Fred Craddock before: "My wife and I were vacationing in one of our favorite spots, The Great Smoky Mountains in Tennessee. We were at dinner in a restaurant that had an excellent view of the mountains. Early in the meal we were approached by an elderly man. 'Good evening,' he said. I said, 'Good evening.'

"He said, 'Are you on vacation?'

"I said, 'Yes,' all the while thinking to myself, 'It's really none of your business.'

" 'Where are you from?' he asked.

" 'Oklahoma.'

" 'What do you do in Oklahoma?'

"To myself I was saying, 'Leave us alone. We're on vacation! But I said, 'I am a Christian minister, Disciples of Christ.'

"He paused a moment, then said, 'I owe a great deal to a minister of the Christian church.' So he pulled up a chair and sat down!

"I said, "Sure, have a seat,' but I didn't mean it. Who is this person?

"He said, 'I grew up in these mountains. My mother was not married and the whole community knew it. I was what was called an illegitimate child and worse names. In those days, that was a shame and I was ashamed. When I went into town with my mother I could see people staring at me, making guesses as to who was my father. At school the children said ugly things to me. I always ate my lunch alone.

"In my early teens I began to attend a little church back in the mountains called Laurel Christian Church. It had a minister who was both attractive and frightening. He had a heavy beard and a deep voice. I went to hear him preach. I don't know exactly why, but it did something for me. However, I was afraid if they really knew who I was, my background, I would not be welcome. So I would arrive just in time for the sermon and leave as soon as it was over, before anyone could say anything or ask who I was.

"But one Sunday, people lined up in the aisle before I could get out. I was trapped. Before I could get away I felt a large strong hand on my shoulder. It was the minister. I trembled in fear. He turned me around so he could look in my face and just stared at me. I knew what he was doing. I knew he was going to make a guess as to who my father was. Then he said it, 'Well, boy, you are a child of...' and he paused. I knew what was coming. I knew my feelings were going to be hurt. I knew I would never go back to this church again. He spoke again, 'Well, boy, you are a child of God. I see a striking resemblance boy.' Then he swatted me on the bottom and said, 'Now you go out and claim your inheritance.' I left that building a different person. In fact, that was really the beginning of my life.'

"Craddock says, 'I was so moved by his story that I had to ask his name. He said, 'Ben Hooper.'

Then I remembered...I remembered my father talking when I was just a boy how the people of Tennessee had twice elected as governor a man who was an illegitimate child...Ben Hooper."

You just never know how Jesus might choose to use you, no matter how inadequate, stupid, fat or bald you may feel. But he will. Sometimes Jesus calls disciples through other disciples who don't know how good they are at calling disciples! It is so much easier to sit here, look at Jesus, and believe that he is the light of the world rather than to look at ourselves and each other and believe that we are called by him to be lights to the world. But he does and we are. Don't be so afraid to let your light shine for all to see.

This text and so many texts tell us we can change and keep changing. I said much the same thing last week, but on this Launch Sunday I was to say it again. We are not trapped in our histories or our fears. We can set ourselves and our communities on a new course. And I know that our progress toward the vision he offers is often painfully slow and halting, but much like Nathanael or Daryl in the convalescent home or frightened young Ben Hooper in church, there are those moments – and they will come, perhaps today, perhaps during this church year, but they will come – moments when we catch a glimpse of the people we might become.