

John 1:35–45 (Common English Bible)

³⁵The next day John [the Baptist] was standing again with two of his disciples.

³⁶When he saw Jesus walking along he said, “Look! The Lamb of God!” ³⁷The two disciples heard what he said, and they followed Jesus.

³⁸When Jesus turned and saw them following, he asked, “What are you looking for?”

They said, “Rabbi (which is translated Teacher), where are you staying?”

³⁹He replied, “Come and see.” So they went and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon.

⁴⁰One of the two disciples who heard what John said and followed Jesus was Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter. ⁴¹He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which is translated Christ). ⁴²He led him to Jesus.

Jesus looked at him and said, “You are Simon, son of John. You will be called Cephas” (which is translated Peter).

⁴³The next day Jesus wanted to go into Galilee, and he found Philip. Jesus said to him, “Follow me.” ⁴⁴Philip was from Bethsaida, the hometown of Andrew and Peter.

⁴⁵Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law and the Prophets: Jesus, Joseph’s son, from Nazareth.”

Luke 15:1–10 (Common English Bible)

All the tax collectors and sinners were gathering around Jesus to listen to him.

²The Pharisees and legal experts were grumbling, saying, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

³Jesus told them this parable: ⁴“Suppose someone among you had one hundred sheep and lost one of them. Wouldn’t he leave the other ninety-nine in the pasture and search for the lost one until he finds it? ⁵And when he finds it, he is thrilled and places it on his shoulders. ⁶When he arrives home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Celebrate with me because I’ve found my lost sheep.’ ⁷In the same way, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who changes both heart and life than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need to change their hearts and lives.

⁸“Or what woman, if she owns ten silver coins and loses one of them, won’t light a lamp and sweep the house, searching her home carefully until she finds it? ⁹When she finds it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Celebrate with me because I’ve found my lost coin.’ ¹⁰In the same way, I tell you, joy breaks out in the presence of God’s angels over one sinner who changes both heart and life.”

How hard would you look for one lost cow, when there are 99 others that need your attention? How good, really, is the Good News?

In the fall of 2011, we at St. Andrew embarked on a more focused mission to help people come to a deeper and more abiding relationship with Jesus Christ. We embraced the work of calling the Christian-ish to become passionate servants of Jesus Christ. In part, we hoped to help everyone see that there is something of the Christian-ish in us all as we strive to become evermore Christlike servants of our Lord. In addition, our mission statement recognized that there is a growing problem in American Christianity, in that the historic, apostolic faith is being diluted, marginalized and fundamentally altered such that in too many quarters what passes for the Christian faith is hardly Christian at all. It isn’t a stretch to claim that the fastest growing religion in America is a “Christless Christianity.” It is certainly worth going back over some of the research that leads to such a dramatic conclusion.

Christless Christianity

One of the most important research studies of religion and faith in recent years is the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), led by Christian Smith from the University of North Carolina. I won't bore you with the details of their methodology, but it is a very well done study, better than most. They did phone surveys with several thousand older youth, tracked them over a period of years, and supplemented the phone surveys with in-depth interviews of hundreds of them. It is the sort of sociological research you can actually have confidence in.

Recognizing that the faith of teenagers and young adults tends to reflect that of their parents, Smith and his colleagues came to some startling conclusions, including:

We have come with some confidence to believe that a significant part of Christianity in the United States is actually only tenuously Christian in any sense that it is seriously connected to the actual historical Christian tradition. . . . It is not so much that U. S. Christianity is being secularized. Rather, more subtly, Christianity is either degenerating into a pathetic version of itself, or more significantly, Christianity is being colonized and displaced by quite a different religious tradition.

Based on their research, Smith found the key tenets of this new "Christianity," which he labeled "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" (or simply "MTD") to be:

- A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.
- This god wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
- The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
- This god does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when needed to resolve a problem.
- Good people go to heaven when they die.

Look over these five tenets and ask yourself what, or better, who is missing? Of course: Jesus is missing! According to this version of "Christianity" there is no need for Jesus. Sure we might need some help from time to time, and it is handy that God is there to lend a hand, but we don't need a rescue from our sinfulness. Sin has no place in MTD.

And what constitutes the "good" we are supposed to do so we can go to heaven. "Be nice." That's it, the sum of human morality and the Judeo-Christian ethic across three millenia. Be nice. Smith gets it right when he calls this new faith "pathetic."

Another NSYR researcher, Kenda Creasy Dean, calls MTD a parasite, living off Christianity, but slowly weakening it and eventually destroying it. She calls MTD "Christian-ish" not Christian. She writes, "Why do teenagers practice Moralistic Therapeutic Deism? Not because they have misunderstood what we have taught them in church. They practice it because this is what we have taught them in church."

If the American church is going to avoid going the way of the church in Europe, where church attendance and religious devotion has been in decline for decades, we must do our part to proclaim the Gospel in an increasingly disinterested, ill-informed, and even hostile culture. But how, we ask?

The ninety-nine and the one

Jesus told many parables. Sometimes, when the point he wanted to make was especially important, he told several similar stories. One such sequence is in the 15th chapter of Luke's gospel. A shepherd has a flock of a hundred sheep. One of the sheep has become separated from the others. What does the shepherd do? Leave the ninety-nine and head out to find the one. He is so thrilled when he finds the single lost sheep, the shepherd throws a party and invites everyone over.

A woman keeps her coins in a safe place, but then misplaces one of her ten coins. She tears the place apart searching high and low for the lost coin. When she finds it, she too

throws a party. Like the shepherd, she can't contain her excitement over having found what was lost.

After insulting his father, a young man heads off to make his way in the world. Having come to ruin, he returns home. How does the father receive him? With overwhelming joy.

These three parables form a pattern that mirrors Jesus' ministry. The gospel of John opens with John's "In the beginning was the Word . . ." prologue.¹ Then very rapidly,¹ John the Baptizer baptizes Jesus in the Jordan River and declares him to be the Lamb of God. Then, Jesus invites two young men to join him, one of whom is named Andrew, who, in turn, heads off to find his brother. Andrew has been found and next it will be his brother, Simon, whom Jesus will call Peter. Both become disciples of Jesus.²

The "next day," Jesus heads for Galilee, where he tells Philip to "follow me." Philip's hometown was that of Andrew and Peter, Bethsaida³, though Peter was living in Capernaum at the time of Jesus' public ministry. Philip then approaches a friend, Nathanael, telling him that he's found the one long promised in the Hebrew Scriptures. Of course, when Philip says that the promised one is from Nazareth, Nathanael scoffs. How could the great Messiah come from a dump like Nazareth?! But Andrew persists, telling Nathanael to just "come and see." And when Nathanael meets Jesus, he proclaims Jesus as Messiah and Son of God, though he doesn't grasp Jesus' full identity. Still, Nathanael enthusiastically responds to the invitation.

Inviting: Come and see

Perhaps God's challenge to us to invite is as simple as Andrew's "come and see." Andrew doesn't pass out tracts or stand on street corners. He doesn't grab folks by the collar and drag them into some place they'd rather not be. Instead, he simply tells his friend what Jesus told him, "Come and see." Andrew is confident that Nathanael's encounter with Jesus will be as profound and life-changing as his own. Just a simple "come and see;" that's all and, yet, that's everything.

Of course, one might ask, what is it that people are invited to "come and see" now. It's not as if Jesus of Nazareth is standing in the Narthex waiting to greet visitors. But in a sense, he can be. Isn't each of us supposed to be Christ to the people we meet when we come to St. Andrew? Have we really made the campus as inviting as we can? Have we gone out seeking the "one"?

Were you ever invited to meet Jesus, to "come and see" for yourself? If so, how would you describe your experience? How did you first get to St. Andrew? Were you invited? By whom? How did you feel when you were invited? When you arrived? In the hours after you arrived? Have you ever invited someone to come with you to St. Andrew? What are some of the various ways we invite? How could we all become better inviters?

John the Baptizer testified to the light, that is, to Jesus, the "true light that enlightens the world" (John 1:7-8). When Jesus tells his disciples, "You are the light of the world," he means that the light of Christ is to shine through his disciples, through you and me. Those we invite to "come and see" are to see Jesus in each of us. So we invite and we welcome and we greet and we embrace as we proclaim the Good News to all those who come to hear.

¹The events in the first chapter move forward from "the next day" to "the next day" to "the next day."

²"Disciple" can be an intimidating word for some. But all it really conveys is the idea of an apprenticeship.

²"Disciple" can be an intimidating word for some. But all it really conveys is the idea of an apprenticeship. Disciples of Jesus are those who are actively striving to be like Jesus, to be more Christlike. Can a person be a believer but not a disciple? I guess so, at least for awhile. Can a person grow in his or her faith without being a disciple? I think not. What does God want from us? To be disciples and to make more disciples. It is God's job to save souls. Our work is to cultivate more and more apprentices of the Master.

³Bethsaida was a town on the northeastern shore of Galilee, while Capernaum was on the northwestern shore.

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Sermon Notes

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