

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Do You Want the Truth?

John 18:33-38

Sunday, November 21, 2021

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Have you ever tried to guess where people are from by the way they talk? The other day I was chatting with a nurse about her husband who plays golf. She said, "He's wicked good." I said, "Massachusetts or Maine?" She said, "I'm from Maine. How did you know?" I said, "Nobody down here says wicked unless it's Halloween."

I remember when my step sisters and brothers would come visit us from Chicago, we would get the biggest kick out of their thick accents. And they would get the biggest kick out of ours! They always laughed when we said, "Ya'll." We would say, "Well, when you are talking to a group, what do you say, "You all"? "No, we say, "Hey, You Guys!"

And then we would go out to eat with them and they would ask the waiter, "What kind of pop do you have?" Pop? What's pop? You know soda pop." Oh, you mean Coke. That's always a dead give away that someone is from Atlanta. They refer to all brands of soda as "Coke" even if it's not Coke. And Atlantans never say "Co-ca Co-la", nor "At-lan-ta". You drink a "Cocola in Atlanna." Am I right?

Another dead give-away that someone is from Atlanta is the way we say our street names. For example, only a native Atlantan can pronounce Ponce De Leon Avenue, so do not attempt the Spanish pronunciation. We will simply look at you funny. The Atlanta pronunciation is "pawntz duh LEE-awn" (based on a Facebook post about Atlanta).

Yeah, sometimes it's easy to tell where people are from by the way they talk.

And sometimes you can even guess who people are and maybe what they do by the way they dress and carry themselves.

One time I was in a bank and I was chatting with the teller. She said, "You're a preacher, ain't ya?" "How did you know?" "I don't know. You just seem like a preacher. The way you talk and handle yourself." Well, I wasn't wearing a clergy collar and I certainly wasn't pronouncing a blessing on the bank that day. Perhaps it was just my holy glow?

Of course, sometimes people can fool you. They can put on a real good act. They are not who they claim to be. I had a friend who was a real practical joker. One night we were eating at a Rio Bravo Mexican restaurant. He bought one of their hats and began walking around the restaurant acting like the manager. And people believed him! He carried himself with confidence. Just began walking around tables asking people how their meals were. It was hysterical. Before we left, he did a rather cruel thing. He approached a big table of people and asked them how their meal was. Then he said, "Tell you what, have a dessert on us tonight!" And then we left. Can you imagine?

He had them fooled. He looked like a manager. Talked like manager. But he wasn't a real manager.

I remembered being fooled by a lady who came to a previous church needing money. She didn't look destitute. Was well groomed. Well spoken. She told me she went to my Alma Mater Florida Southern. Talked about places in and around the school. Then she shared a very believable story about her needing money to pay for rent. We wrote a check to the apartment complex, thinking it was legit. Later, we came to find out that she was in cahoots with the apartment manager and they were stealing money from churches. She had made everything up and was very convincing. And believe me, I don't get fooled easily. But I was that day.

Sometimes it is easy to tell who people are. And sometimes it's not.

I wonder if it's easy for people to tell that we are Christians. I wonder how people can really tell that we are true blue followers of Jesus Christ. No pretending. Do we have a dead give-away? What do you think might convince them to say, "Yep. Yep, they are a Christian"? Is it by the way we talk or the way we don't talk? Is it the way we dress or the way we carry ourselves? Is it our habits? Our kindness to others? Or is it simply because we claim to be Christians and our names are on a church roll?

I remember hearing a fiery preacher at a Conference as a teenager. He got all lathered up and said, "If you were put on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?"

I am sure some of you have heard that one before. It's not a bad question, you know. The witness says, "Yeah, he's my neighbor. I once saw a Bible in his car. And every Sunday morning I see he and his family dressed real nice going to church. They must be Christians. I will testify that they are Christians."

Another witness says, "Well, no I watched the same family fighting in the parking lot of the church. Screaming and yelling...not so sure...."

The lawyer says, "Well, what about this person? Do you think they are a Christian?"

Witness says, "Well, I have never heard him say a cuss word. He never loses his temper. And in traffic I have seen him let people in ahead of him...Oh, one time I heard him praying on the golf course. At least...I think that is what he was doing? Yeah, I will testify that he is a Christian."

Is that enough evidence you think? Would that really convince someone?

I remember giving a kid a ride to school one time. We were in high school. Parents very strict. Went to church whenever the doors opened. Wouldn't let the kid do anything fun. Wasn't allowed to go to prom. Wasn't allowed to listen to secular music. He looked down on my floor and he saw a CD. It was Def Leppard's Hysteria. He was shocked. You would've thought it had been a book on witchcraft. He said, "Do your parents know you have this? Do you not believe in God or something?"

I got a phone call many years ago when I was serving my very first church. I was really wet behind the ears. It was a small country church and one of my members was calling me all upset. "I need to talk to you." He came over and sat down in my little office and said, "People are talking. And folks are really disappointed in you. We may have to talk to SPR about this." "What is it?" "Well, there is a rumor going around that you were at a bar the other night. Please tell me this is not true." "Well, yes it's true. The place is called Applebee's and it was very crowded. The only table we could find was in the bar."

Oh, it was a real scandal for a while. But I got away with it.

Some people think the strongest evidence that we are Christians is found in our ability to follow rules, following the do's and don't's. Not misbehaving. Not drinking or smoking or cussing. Good church attendance. Being good boys and girls.

But the good Protestants among us strongly disagree, don't we? "No, no Charley, the strongest evidence is faith. Did they repent of their sin and give their lives to Jesus Christ? Remember Ephesians says, "We are saved by grace through faith, not by our works, lest any man should boast."

The defendant says, "Yes, I am saved. I am a Christian. When I was a teenager, I came down the aisle and accepted Christ and was baptized. I am a Christian! I can show you the place in my Bible where my pastor signed his name next to the date of my baptism."

"Did anyone witness this?"

Witness says, "Yes, yes, I remember. He is telling the truth. I was there. I saw him do it. He looked like a drowned rat coming out of that water. There were tears coming down his face. It looked real to me. I even saw him on the street one day sharing the five spiritual laws to a complete stranger. I heard him ask the man, 'If you died tonight, do you know where you would spend eternity?' Yeah, that's enough evidence to convince me. I'd say he was a Christian."

You think that's the strongest evidence? Would that be enough to convince people?

No, no Charley, remember Jesus said, "The world will know you are my disciples if you have love for one another." And the book of James plainly says, "Faith without works is dead." That's much stronger evidence. That's the real stuff. Are people walking their talk? Are they backing up all their preaching about love with action? Those folks are the true Christians. That's how you can tell.

A witness says, "Yeah I believe she is a Christian. I have seen her help out in the soup kitchen. I've heard she visits people in the hospital. She takes the altar flowers to the nursing homes every week. She tutors underprivileged kids at the local school. Only a Christian would do that. She must follow Jesus."

Well, it's hard to argue with that. Many people believe our kindness toward others is the strongest evidence that what we are Christians.

Of course, I wonder where Jesus would land on all of this? I guess he's the one who really counts, right?

Does Jesus believe us? Is he convinced? What do you think convinces Jesus that we are serious about following him? You know, throughout his ministry Jesus was highly suspicious of people who wanted to follow him. He knew he had admirers. Fans. And he had some hard things to say to them:

“No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.” -Luke 9:62

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” - Matthew 16:24

And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. -Luke 14:27

Those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples. – Luke 14:33

Wait, Wait, Back up Charley. Now, that’s another matter altogether. Who can do that? Isn’t following the rules enough? Isn’t having faith in Jesus enough? Isn’t being kind to others enough? I mean, I thought we had all of this Christian faith business figured out. Put your faith in Jesus. Behave. Be kind to people. Go to church. Isn’t that what it’s all about?

Well, apparently there is something else Jesus is looking for in those who would be his followers.

In our text for today Jesus is before Pilate. The religious community wants him executed and they want Pilate to do their dirty work.

Jesus knows whatever he says to Pilate could get him killed. Pilate asked Jesus, “What kind of King are you exactly?”

And then Jesus says something to Pilate that defines his ministry. Defines who he is. “You can call me King or whatever you like, but I will tell you why I was born: to testify to the truth of God, that God is real. You can take me now and torture me but my purpose is to bear witness to the truth of God at all costs.”

That’s our Jesus! Isn’t it? Going all the way for us. No compromising. He resisted the devil in the wilderness, he defied the rich and powerful...Telling like it is....

Oh, but then Jesus says something else...Are you listening?

“My followers, those who belong to the truth, those who take root in me, those who draw life from me, will listen to my voice and do what I do. In a moment of truth, they will not compromise. They will be obedient as I have been obedient.”

Could it be that a real follower of Jesus is one who, well, looks like Jesus? Could it be when faced with a moment of truth a follower of Jesus will listen to the voice of Jesus and be obedient, even if it costs them?

Yeah, yeah, I get it Charley. I have heard those stories. They put a gun to a man’s head and they say if you don’t renounce your faith we are going to kill you. Or Rosa Parks resisting the authorities and remaining seated in the white section of the bus. Or those whistle blowers who bring down an entire corporation because of their greed. We admire people like that. They are heroes.

But, most of us live very ordinary lives. We don’t face such moments of truth.

Oh, I don’t know about that.

You’re at a party with all of your friends. Everyone is having fun and telling jokes. And then someone starts to tell racist jokes...What do you do? Listen to Jesus and walk away or laugh with them to be part of the group?

You’re in the lunch room at school and you see the bullied kid sitting by himself eating his lunch. Your friends are saving your seat like they always do and they are calling you over. What do you do? Do you listen to voice of Jesus telling you to sit with him and risk getting ridiculed yourself?

Your estranged brother calls you. You have been bitter about him for years. You say you will never forgive him for what he did. You don’t answer and send it to voice mail. He wants to reconcile. Do you listen to the voice of Jesus or do you ignore it?

“Fred Craddock once decided to go back home for a visit when he was on school break. It is no place special on the map. It is just a little town in Arkansas. On the first morning of his visit he ventured downtown. He walked into the diner that had been there for a hundred years. Fred just wanted to sit there, eat breakfast and remember simpler times. He said the place had not changed. Everything was identical to his youth, even the owner.

“As Fred waited for his fried eggs, the owner walked up to him and said, “I know you! You used to live here. You went on to be a preacher! I need to talk to you.” Fred nodded yes, but he thought, “Just go away! All I want is breakfast and some quiet.”

“The owner pulled up a chair and began to talk. He said to Fred, “I don’t know what to do.” Fred said, “About what?” The owner responded, “About the curtain!” He motioned to the curtain and Fred looked. The curtain had been there for years. Fred remembered that curtain from his childhood. The curtain wasn’t there just for decorative purposes. It had a practical purpose. The curtain was there to separate the white customers from the black customers. The white customers would enter the restaurant through the front door and ate on that side of the curtain. The black customers entered through the back door and ate on that side of the curtain.

“Just then, Fred’s breakfast was delivered. He wanted the owner to finish up his story because his eggs were getting cold. To hasten it along, Fred asked the owner, “So what is the problem?” (Fred knew the problem.) The owner said, “Should I take the curtain down or should I leave the curtain up?” Fred gave him a blank look and the owner continued. “If I take the curtain down, I will lose my business. If I leave the curtain up, I will lose my soul!”” (taken from a transcript from an unknown source).

When it counts, do we listen to the voice of Jesus or do we ignore it? Oh, listening to Jesus, being a follower, will cost you, no doubt about it. But at the end of the day as you are getting into bed thinking about what you did and the consequences of it, if you listen closely, you will hear Jesus say to you, “I saw what you did today. I have been telling the angels about it. I couldn’t be prouder of you.”



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