

## **A *Want-To* Faith**

*John 1:43-51*

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Is faith something we *want to* have as a part of our lives? Or is faith something that feels like a *have-to*...such as we need to have faith in the same way that we need to go to the dentist to have healthy teeth?

Is faith for you a *want-to* or a *have-to*? Is faith something that feels liberating, freeing live-giving. . . or something that feels rule-bound and oppressive?

Do you know the difference in *want-to* and *have-to*?

We have to pay the bills, or they will come looking for us.

We have to show up at work and most of the time, on time.

We have deadlines in work or school or for other occasions. Those deadlines are *have-to*'s....or else.

Every day you and I are faced with a list of invitations, responsibilities, deadlines, meetings, social opportunities, civic responsibilities, and family options. Some of those things are *have to*'s. And then there are things we can't wait to do. Those are the *want-to*'s.

Think about the difference—usually the *want-to*'s give us life. Generally the *have-to*'s drain the life and energy right out of us. Now we are a blessed or lucky person if we love our work or most parts of our life.....if we want to show up and we feel grateful for work we do, the purpose it serves, and the people with whom we work. We are blessed and lucky if we feel that way about most parts of life.

Here is my observation: A life that has too many *have-to*'s is a life that eventually turns in on itself. You cannot just keep your head down over the long haul with one *have-to* after another and expect to come out on the other side as an emotionally and spiritually healthy person.

When our lives are too full of *have-to*'s (those things that suck the life out of us), not only do we end up being unhappy, joyless, dull and cynical, but we become contagious. We

spread our attitudes and dispositions to the people and the world around and that shows up in what we do, how we do it, and how we relate to just about everyone.

So, where does our faith fit into this discussion?

- Is our faith a *want to* or a *have-to*?
- What about church?
- What is the role of church in being or in promoting a *want-to* or a *have-to* faith?
- And what about Jesus in all of this?

I'm glad you asked.

## I

Here we are in the first chapter of John's Gospel and with one very illuminating story revealing (I believe) the core and the tone of the Christian faith.

It is the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Jesus is in Galilee and has found Philip – a future disciple — and says to him, "Follow me." Philip then finds Nathanael and tells him he has found this man Jesus, whom Moses, the prophets and the scripture talk about.

When Nathaniel hears that Jesus is from Nazareth, Nathaniel, who is from Cana, says sarcastically, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

We know how it is to be from one place and to think condescendingly or speak mockingly of another community. It is petty, typically, but it is also revealing of human nature. So North Carolinians mock those from South Carolina, and those from Alabama mock those from Mississippi; those from Greensboro mock those from High Point, and those from Cana (Nathaniel's hometown) mock those from Nazareth.

Can anything good come out of Nazareth?

He says this to Philip and did you hear Philip's outstanding and spiritually healthy response? "Come and see."

I love that. Nothing defensive. Nothing like, "You don't know what you are talking about, you ignorant dimwit."

No. "Come and see."

Then Jesus sees Nathanael coming toward him and he says to Nathanael, "Here is truly an

Israelite in whom there is no deceit!”

Okay, that sounds a bit stilted, so this is how Eugene Peterson translates Jesus’ words: “Now there’s an Israelite: not a false bone in his body.” In other words, this guy is authentic, and a straight shooter. In other words, Jesus, overhearing his hometown mocked, says to the mocker, “This guy tells it the way he sees it.”

Nathanael is surprised, taken off guard, even impressed. He says to Jesus, “Where did you get to know me?”

“I saw you under the fig tree...” replies Jesus.

Now, we don’t know what Nathanael was doing under the fig tree nor what Jesus saw in him that day. However, Nathanael is taken with Jesus and his astute insights and says, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”

Jesus answers, “Do you believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.”

“You will see greater things than these.”

In my mind, there are few better lines describing the nature of our discipleship or the tone of our faith: “Come and see greater things than these.”

This is the tone of a *want-to* faith, and a *want-to* religion. This is the tone of invitation, hope, adventure, promise.

## II

So, here’s the question: Is our faith a *want-to* or a *have-to*? When we, the church, are at our best, our tone is a *want-to* faith.

After the joint service with Saint James Presbyterian Church last October, a gathering that was historic, significant, and reconciling, I received lots of comments, letters, and emails from our members. Not one negative note, mind you. No. They said things like this:

“It was the best day ever at First Presbyterian.”

“Sunday was glorious and I know our next steps will thoughtful and full of growth.”

“Sunday was a wonderful, meaningful and hopeful day...a sanctuary filled with loving Presbyterians!”

“I have been a member of First Presbyterian all of my long life. I have never been so proud of my church!”

Now those are the sounds of a *want-to* faith and the tone of a *want-to* church. That is when the church is being our best, when we are pointing to Jesus, and pointing to the road of faith, and saying, “Come and see; you ain’t seen nothing yet; you will see greater things than these. Because Jesus leads us in a joyful, living giving adventure.”

A seminary classmate of mine now a preacher wrote this:

*I heard about a minister who preached a sermon on sin in which he said there were at least seven hundred and eighty-six different varieties. In his e-mail in-box the next day, he had fifty-five requests for the list.*

(In my mind, at least, it’s depressing that a preacher would spend his time and energy classifying the number of sins, but more depressing is that so many people would be clamoring after the list!)

My preacher classmate continues:

*The role of the church, is not so much to explain God to the people but to gather people to consider how God explains life. The church invites. What you will find is not a laundry list of faith but an invitation to explore faith. Come and see what God has done and what God is doing.*

Yes!

When we, the church, are being our best, we are pointing to God, showing the road, inviting others to come and see that there are greater things ahead. We are not giving but a laundry list of *have-to*’s, but an invitation to come and see who God is, what God is doing in the world, and what God is doing in our life and in the lives of others.

### III

There is always this delicate line somewhere between being responsible on the one hand and on the other hand being imbued with the joy, and passion and the life-giving faith that brought us here in the first place.

So, when our money gets tight in the church or we are trying, to get people to pledge so that we can plan a budget based on what we can anticipate, we can say things such as:

“It is your responsibility as a Christian and as a church member to financially support this church and our mission!”

But I like it much better when we reflect, are inviting, we are pointing to God and showing what God is doing.

We point to our classrooms where five-year-olds are learning about God, faith, and love, or to remember Hot Dish and Hope and the hungry we serve. Or we sit in a funeral and hear how the church has made the difference in a person's life...and we discover the greater things of God; then our motive to give is not because we *have to*...but because we *want to*, and I believe the difference between *have to* and *want to* is really the difference between life and death.

More than anything else, I believe the church is being the church when we are inviting and pointing to God's greater things.

#### IV

And for you and me?

Well, I don't know where you are in your faith, but this is what I do know: When our faith is dominated by a disproportionate tone of responsibility and our faith has become a *have-to* faith, then we are robbing ourselves of a life-giving faith, and of a God who calls us.... not to burden us but to give us life and joyful purpose, a faith that gives us some zip in our steps.

I mean, when you look at Jesus and his encounters with people (people like you and me) he simply invited them to follow, to get on board with a promise— come and see, you will see greater things than this.

That's a *want-to* faith.