

“A Grand Introduction”  
The Rev. Nancy Conklin  
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John 1: 29-42

Do you ever pay much attention to how we tend to introduce people to one another, be they family members, friends, or business associates? We don't simply say “Jane Smith, meet Jack Jones.” Most likely, we include a tag line: “This is Jane Smith, head of marketing” or “this is Jack Jones, a friend from college.” Proper etiquette tells us that our personal introductions should include some sort of description of how it is we know the person. For those within our families or social circles, the way we introduce someone reflects how well we know them and the level of affection we have for them.

Some people have a real knack for introducing family members. “This is my daughter — she graduated top of her class at Cornell,” boasts a proud mother at a family reunion. Or, “this is my brother John — he's going to be the next Tom Brady,” boasts a proud sister. My friend Greg, who tends toward hyperbole, always introduces me as his “dear, dear friend Nancy,” while I simply say “this is my good friend Greg; we went to seminary together.” That doesn't mean that I love Greg any less than he loves me, it's just that he's a born storyteller, prone to seeing life as a series of grand stories with larger-than-life characters.

It can be very flattering to have someone embellish our character and make a grand introduction of us to a complete stranger. There can also be a downside. Our grand introduction might unfairly heap great expectations on someone. The one who is always introduced as whom I view to be “the perfect mother” loses the right to tear her hair out when her child is out of control. A son or daughter who is always introduced to the world with a list of accomplishments following their name can view their worthiness by what they've achieved and loses the right to fail at something. Making grandiose introductions, no matter how well intentioned they are, may give a false impression of someone, even possibly denying them the right to be who they really are.

We all hope the way we introduce people who are important to us to others will lead to meaningful conversations, creating the foundation for a lasting connection. That, too, I think, was the hope of those early followers of Jesus as they introduced him to their family and friends. When he saw Jesus coming toward him, John the Baptist shouted, “Look, here is the Lamb of God” — a grand introduction that certainly got the attention of two of John's disciples, who turned from listening to him and started following Jesus. One of them, Andrew, after meeting Jesus, the carpenter from Nazareth, introduced him to his brother Simon as the Messiah. Likewise, Phillip, having been introduced to Jesus as the Messiah, introduced him to Nathanael as the “one who was spoken about by Moses in the law, and also by the prophets.” Nathanael wasn't all that impressed by Phillip's grand introduction because he didn't believe anyone special would come from a town like Nazareth. He must have thought to himself that surely Jesus' friends were like my friend Greg, prone to hyperbole. But, then, Nathanael met Jesus and afterward makes the grandest of all introductions for Jesus as “the Son of God, the King of Israel.”

At the very beginning of his public life, Jesus — the carpenter who became a teacher — was introduced by his friends in ways that led to meaningful conversations, creating the foundation for a lasting connection to God's Chosen One. Introductions that began what theologian

Dorothy O'Day calls the "drama of discipleship." A drama that unfolded when Jesus turned to John's disciples and asked them, "What are you looking for?" By their introductions, we know each of the early disciples came to Jesus with differing expectations, differing needs. Two were looking for the Lamb of God who would complete the baptism they received from John by gifting them with the Holy Spirit and a fresh start at life. One was seeking a teacher who would help them better understand the walk of faith. Another sought the long-hoped-for Messiah who would restore the kingdom and release them from their oppression. The other had been studiously preparing for his own hope at becoming a rabbi and anxiously awaiting the fulfillment of God's promises through the prophets. Each came to Jesus with different expectations of who Jesus was and with differing needs of who they needed him to be in their own lives. All of them found the one they were looking for.

Our own drama of discipleship began the moment we answered Jesus' call to us — "what are you looking for?" — and found it in him. Our discipleship continues to be shaped by our own answer to that question and Jesus' attendant response. What is it that you and I seek from Jesus? What are our particular needs at this moment in our faith journey? Who are you looking for? A rabbi to help you grow in the faith you profess? The Lamb of God to release you from the sin that keeps you from living a life of freedom and joy? The Messiah, the one you depend upon to lead you as you participate in the transformation of the world? Who is Jesus for you? An important question not just for our lives but because we, too, are called to introduce Jesus to others — an introduction we make by way of our own experience with him.

Recently, I had one of those conversations I'm really tired of having. Thanks to Facebook, I reconnected with someone I haven't seen in over 30 years. My friend was intrigued at my career choice as a pastor, and it wasn't too long into the conversation that I heard her distaste for the church. She grew up Roman Catholic, but hasn't been to church since childhood. She now lives in a town in New Jersey and owns her own shop. Because of who she is, when my friend first opened her shop, the residents of that community, which boldly claims to have deeply Christian roots, repeatedly informed her that she and her store were not welcome. Some people vocalized their intolerance in person; others through hate mail that my friend collects and posts in her store window. Caught totally off guard and heartbroken, I again found myself having to defend not only my chosen profession, but my faith.

I don't know if you engage in such discussion at work or elsewhere, but it seems like in social settings I never get away from them — part of the challenge of being clergy, I guess. I try really hard to reframe the conversation away from the institutional church and the failings of religion and share my own experience of faith within and outside of the church. I hope the conversation can become an opportunity to reintroduce people to Jesus who preached, taught, and lived the radically inclusive love of God. And, whom I'm fully confident, would say "not in my name" to those Christians who have walked into my friend's shop hailing insults at her. As it has happened more times than not, my ability to listen and speak without getting defensive led my friend to speak of her own desire for that faith she had as a child. Then it became a conversation I never tire of having. That's how the drama of discipleship continues, with someone being re-introduced to Jesus, taking a few hesitant steps toward him, and then Jesus being the one to turn around and ask, "What are you looking for?" But, that won't happen unless we are willing to make a grand introduction of He whom we have found.