

God's Open Invitation
John 3:1-8 and Luke 7:36-50
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Have you ever seen one of those car dealership commercials that says, "Anyone can buy a car with us! Absolutely no one will be turned away!"? But, in the fine print, if you had time to read it which you don't because it flashes across your screen so fast, you'd see that "anyone" really means only the people who pass their credit check. Cell phone deals can be like that, too. Come in and switch, we're told, only to discover that the deal or discount only applies to a certain group of customers. Frequently, at least in advertising, "anyone" doesn't really mean anyone. There's always a catch.

In Luke 9:23 Jesus says, "If anyone wants to become my follower, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me." Anyone, says Jesus, can become my disciple, and when Jesus says anyone, he means literally **anyone**.

To modern day Christians, it's easy to read over that word and miss the potent meaning behind it. Of course, Jesus means anybody; that's what the church has been saying for 2000 years. But, let's not assume we know everything Jesus meant by this open invitation. Remember that in Jesus' society, he was regarded as a rabbi. An unconventional one to be sure, but a rabbi nonetheless. Every rabbi had a group of students or disciples, called talmids, that studied under him. This was an exclusive group of people. Not just anyone was taken to be a talmid, and those who didn't make the cut usually ended up learning some sort of trade, typically one that was passed down in their family. They'd work as stonemasons, fishermen or trades people.

For those who wanted to become the talmid of a particular rabbi, they had to go through an application process. There were hefty prerequisites before they could be considered, something comparable to students nowadays providing their transcripts, SAT scores and proof of GPA to get into an elite university. Talmids had to have an impressive knowledge of the Hebrew scriptures. A rabbi might quiz a prospective talmid by asking him to recite an entire book or to tell him the number of times the name of the Lord was used in the eleventh chapter of Leviticus. It was an intense, painstaking process, but the rabbi had to be thorough because the excellence of the student reflected the excellence of the teacher. If a rabbi's group of talmid were especially brilliant, the rabbi would be respected and

admired. But, then Jesus changed the system, especially when he invited a tax collector to be one of his followers.

Try to put yourself in Galilee. Imagine hearing about this amazing teacher who was performing miracles and healing people in ways that defied explanation. He's all the rage, and people are flocking to hear him speak. Then, they see his talmid, his disciples. Wait a minute. This can't be right; there must be some mistake. How can he be as great as people say he is if *these* guys are his followers? They're nobodies. Those two there used to be fishermen, a few of them are just political hotheads, and that guy Nicodemus is a tax collector!

But, then, they started to wonder...well, if *they* can be his students, his talmid, I wonder if *I* could be? I thought that dream was dead long ago, but maybe...And then, they heard him say, "anybody can be my follower. You are all welcome in my circle. And, anyone means anyone: no qualifications are necessary."

- ❖ Addict? Anyone.
- ❖ Hypocrite? Anyone.
- ❖ Got a past? Anyone.
- ❖ Abused? Or Abuser? Anyone.
- ❖ Legalist? Anyone.
- ❖ Got regrets? Anyone.
- ❖ Sinner? Anyone.

We think we know what "anyone" means, but what happens when we truly embrace Jesus' open invitation to anyone is that our unwritten codes and unspoken expectations get exposed. If literally anyone can be a follower of Jesus, then we're going to be rubbing shoulders with people who are really different from us—from different backgrounds and social circles, people who have different music collections and recreational activities than we do, people whose wardrobes or body art confuse or annoy us, people who are hard to tolerate and even harder to love. We talked last week about the difference between fans and followers, and here's one place that difference shows itself: a fan won't stick around to do the hard work of loving others who are so radically different. Fans want things to be shallow and comfortable. But followers are willing to break down walls, trash the unwritten codes and welcome "anyone" into God's family and—here's the really sticky part—into our own family. Followers are willing to listen, willing to hear stories of brokenness and sin and still open their arms and welcome people.

So, when it comes to following Jesus, anyone really does mean anyone, but it also means **everything**. When Jesus makes his invitation, he welcomes anyone who wants to follow him, but he also makes it clear that when you choose to follow him, you will be giving up everything. So, it's anyone. But it's also everything.

When a talmid was finally accepted into a rabbi's school, he would leave behind his home, his job, his family, and anything else that was holding him back, and he would go and follow the rabbi. Literally, the talmids would follow the rabbi wherever he went. If the rabbi went to the market, his students would follow. If the rabbi decided to walk to the next town, his whole group of students would go, too. If the rabbi needed to make a house call to visit someone who was sick, the talmids tagged along.

If the rabbi decided to live without a home, as Jesus did, his students followed suit. And, if the rabbi decided to regularly hang out with sinners, prostitutes, drug dealers, convicts and the like, as Jesus did, his students went with him. If Jesus decided not to run from persecution, his students would follow him in that, too. Whatever they saw their rabbi doing, the disciples imitated him.

This is the invitation Jesus is offering us. The greatest rabbi who ever lived offers us the opportunity to become one of his students, one of his followers. The offer is extended to anyone. But it will cost us everything.

Which begs the question, why would anyone choose to take Jesus up on such an offer? I mean, he's not exactly making it sound very enticing and perhaps we begin to understand and even empathize with why so many people choose to be fans instead of followers. Following is starting to sound awfully hard. So, why do people do it? I think it comes down to the difference between knowledge and intimacy. Fans know about Jesus, but followers know Jesus and are known by Jesus.

There is perhaps no better story that illustrates the difference than the one recorded in Luke 7. There we read about two people who encounter Jesus on very different paths. Jesus has been invited to dinner at Simon the Pharisee's house. Simon doesn't give Jesus a kiss when he arrives, though that was the custom. It was also the custom to wash the feet of your guests, or to have a servant do it, but Jesus' feet go unwashed. And, often when you had a guest, especially a distinguished guest, you would give them some inexpensive olive oil to anoint their head. Simon failed to do that, too.

But, the meal proceeds and while Jesus and Simon are in the middle of their entrée, suddenly there appears an uninvited guest. She is well-known throughout the community as a woman of ill-repute. She walks into the house weeping and falls at Jesus' feet. Her tears drip off her cheeks and onto Jesus' still dirty, dusty feet, feet that should have been washed by his highly regarded host. The woman sees that Jesus' feet are not washed, so she lets down her hair and with her tears she washes his feet and with her hair she dries them. I don't think she planned to do this—she would have assumed that Jesus' feet would already have been washed. In her brokenness, she continues to weep and caress his feet; then she pulls out a jar of very expensive perfume and pours it over them. She has washed, kissed and anointed Jesus—all the things Simon didn't do.

Simon the fan stands apart, aloof. This woman, sinner and follower, draws close, so close she can smell the sweat and the dust and feel the callouses of Jesus' well-worn feet. She wasn't interested in knowing *about* Jesus—she wanted to *know* Jesus—up close, personal, her soul mingled with his. And here's the really shocking part—Jesus wanted to know her, too. Not from a distance, not at arms-length, but intimately know her, to the darkest recesses of her heart and soul.

If we have any sense of the holiness and omnipotence of God, we “get” that God knows us. The psalmist famously says, “O Lord, you have examined my heart and know everything about me. You know when I sit down or stand up. You know my thoughts even when I'm far away. You see me when I go out and when I rest at home. You know everything I do. You know what I am going to say even before I say it, Lord.” The one who created us knows us intimately.

What's more astounding is that God invites us to know him with that same kind of intimacy. God wants his soul to mingle with our souls. God says to us in effect, “I want you to know my heart, to connect with me on a level that can only be reached through the most vulnerable intimacy. I want our souls to come together, for both of us to know the other deeply and wholly.”

It sounds beautiful and at some level we know that that kind of intimacy with God is the very thing our souls most long for and the only thing that will truly satisfy us. But, we have a hard time believing it. One of the most common responses to intimacy is fear. Intimacy is scary because it involves allowing ourselves to be vulnerable, and we know from experience that vulnerability and pain go hand-in-hand. It is the rare person who at some point or another has not experienced betrayal or a devastating blow from someone they trusted and opened up to. We make ourselves vulnerable and then someone lets us down.

And then there's the problem that if we make ourselves vulnerable to God, we know God is going to look at our lives and find some things that aren't very impressive—the resentment we've been harboring, the bad attitude towards our neighbor, the anger or addiction or pride we can't seem to conquer. Better to keep our distance, we think. Getting too close might require us to examine some things we'd prefer to leave hidden and to change some things we don't really want to deal with.

It is more comfortable and it feels safer to choose knowledge over intimacy, to be a fan instead of a follower. Simon calls Jesus, "Teacher," because he's interested in learning from Jesus, but he's not interested in opening up to Jesus. He wants to keep things shallow, and he defined the relationship by not washing Christ's feet, not caring to greet him with a kiss, not anointing his head. But, then a real follower showed up. She made herself vulnerable, being totally willing for Jesus to know who and what she was.

So, what about you? Will you let Jesus know you? Will you embrace the close and intimate relationship Jesus wants to have with you, so that you can be a follower and not just a fan? It is in intimacy with him that we experience true forgiveness, freedom, joy and peace—and know that we are truly loved for who we are, no matter what.

Amen.