

Come and See God in Each Person
July 26, 2026
I've Been Meaning to Ask, Week 2

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*Grace and peace to you in God who has created us, redeemed us,
and sustains our lives. Amen.*

Last Sunday, the fellowship hall was filled with people sharing conversation at our Ice Cream Social event.

It was a sort of mixer, with discussion questions and people moving to new conversation partners between rounds.

My heart filled with joy listening to the spirited discussion and laughter that filled the room, as people made new acquaintances and shared new stories with longtime friends.

At the end of the event, participants were invited to reflect on the experience and share what had fostered connection in the conversations, and what they had learned.

Monday afternoon, I was typing up the responses:

- We are all from different backgrounds but are all happy we have connected here at All Saints
- Sharing treasured memories made me feel connected
- I learned that even with differences of life experiences, how much we were alike in our feelings about life
- Everyone was having fun with it so it was easy to feel connected

Then the chaplain phone rang – the classic telephone ring tone that always makes me jump now because it is the tone of the on call police chaplain phone which I carry for 24 hours twice each month.

That afternoon, I was called out to the scene of a homicide – the second homicide call that day.

And it came to me then that these conversation exercises, this focus on how we connect with one another, even across differences of experience and circumstance, is so important right now.

I was called to the scenes of two murders on Monday,
both of which began with disagreement between neighbors who lacked the
empathy and emotional stability to handle disagreement without violence.
It's a problem all too common in our culture now –
A problem we see even in our government –
the U. S. waging a war of aggression in the middle east,
killings by ICE agents in U.S. cities,
and deaths in immigrant detention continuing to mount
hate-filled rhetoric against transgender people, and legislation denying
their basic rights and dignity
The government is offering a toxic understanding of masculinity and strength,
and too many people are listening.
In such a culture of judgement and mistrust, we need to learn again
to listen to one another and respect one another,
to see one another not as threat or annoyance,
but as neighbors and images of Jesus in the world.

In the gospel story we read today,
Jesus gathers his first followers with the words, *come and see*.
These words, spoken by and about Jesus,
hold an invitation to openness and curiosity,
a willingness to see God working in the world in a new way.

When Philip invites Nathaniel to meet Jesus, Nathaniel's response is,
“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

Professor Thomas Slater at Mercer University in Atlanta explains his reaction:
*Nazareth sat in the heart of Galilee, a region populated by Jews and
Gentiles from several ethnicities. Positively, it could be said that it was a
diverse region. The Jewish communities, at most, constituted about 60
percent of the Galilean populace. Jewish persons in Judea looked down
on their kinsmen in Galilee. Judea was over 90 percent Jewish. Those in
Judea paid the temple tax, kept the rituals more rigorously, and were
less likely to intermarry. On the other hand, Galilean Jews were less
likely to pay the temple tax, more lax in regard to ritualistic traditions,*

and more likely to intermarry. Their Judean cousins saw Galilean Jews as less pure, [less trustworthy].

Such social factors were important in Judean and Roman society then,
and we still respond similarly to people in our own contexts.
When do we make assumptions about people based on their backgrounds,
communities, the color of their skin or the company they keep?
Do we say the International District, when we refer to the part of Albuquerque
filled with immigrants and struggling with poverty?
Or do we call it the war zone?
It matters.

In our current atmosphere of anxiety, and the threat to so much
of what we've believed about our culture and nation,
it's easy to be guarded –
to cling to the ideas and ideals that support us and be suspicious of others.
In the worship resources for our *I've Been Meaning to Ask* series on connection,
Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman writes,

*I think we've lost sight of the nuance and complexity of our neighbors
and even those closest to us. We cling to labels, assumptions, and limited
understandings, using them as materials to construct barriers and false,
insufficient caricatures of one another.*

The worship materials include this prayer of confession:

*When people heard that Jesus was from Nazareth,
they asked, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?"
We confess, O God, that we have asked the same question.
Can anything good come from that side of town?
From a school with poor test scores?
From a criminal history?
From the opposite political party?
From a history of addiction?
From a faith with doubt?
From a church with faults?*

Where are the places we impose judgement and barriers
between ourselves and our neighbors?

In the wider American culture, churches and Christians have become
increasingly associated with attitudes of judgment and exclusion.
It is so important for us, who follow Jesus in the way of love and service,
inclusion and grace, to speak up.

To act and lead in ways that give witness to the God we know,
who created each person in God's image
and is present and active in all of God's creation.

To give witness to a strength based in love and diversity,
each person valued and worthy of care.

On July 1, I attended a hearing at the Bernalillo County Planning Commission
regarding the Islamic center building a new multi-use space at 2nd and
Alameda in the North Valley.

The building had already been approved,
until a group of residents brought an appeal, citing concerns about traffic.
As the news of the planned building and appeal reached more people,
comments hostile to Islam and the Islamic center surfaced.
A prior hearing in June had been postponed because of the intensity of
the opposition.

On July 1, the hearing room was packed – to the point that they had to open
a second room with video connection to the hearing.

Many of the people attending wore green scarves
to indicate our support of the Islamic center.

Among the supporters, many of us were Christian clergy,
wearing our clergy garb with our green scarves to be identified.

Comments over the proposed building went on for over four hours.

Some of the comments in opposition were about traffic concerns;
others were virulently hostile and racist.

Some of those who spoke in opposition cited Christian faith,
and equated Islam with terrorism and anti-Christian violence.

Supporters of the Islamic center, including Christian clergy,
spoke to remind the listeners that the people at the Islamic center
are already our neighbors, that we have lived together in peace and
mutual respect in this city for decades.

Father Christopher Hallada, who serves at Our Lady of Guadalupe in the North
Valley said that support for the Islamic center
" is something that affirms the dignity of the human person."

In the end, the approval for the building was upheld,
although the Islamic Center gave up their plan to include a much-needed
day school on the property.

But the whole discussion exposed the deep-seated divisions, prejudice
and mistrust between communities and individuals here in our city.
This past week, a man was arrested for pulling a gun on one of the priests
who has been vocal in his support of the Islamic community.

As Jesus gathers his disciples in John's story,
one of the disciples invited to come and see is never named.
Professor Gilberto Ruiz writes that this disciple represents us, John's readers,
"who, like the unnamed disciple in the passage, are invited to see for
ourselves how the divine may surprise us, transform us, and upend the
prejudices and categories with which we expect to encounter God in the
world."

It's uncomfortable to come face to face with the division, prejudice and violence
around us – and even more to face our own judgment and mistrust of others.
Yet as Christians we are called to see in the face of each person
the face of Jesus –
to love and serve one another as Jesus loves and serves us.
We are invited to enter each relationship with an openness and curiosity,
to come and see God in and through the people around us.
And we are invited to be witnesses to God's great love for the world
for each human being and all of creation.

Let us pray. *Holy God, forgive us for doubting that you are in all things at all times. Open our eyes to see your goodness, not as something that resides just here or there, but as the expansive grace that it is. Open our hearts to love and serve all our neighbors.*

Can anything good come from there?

Yes. Always yes.

Amen.