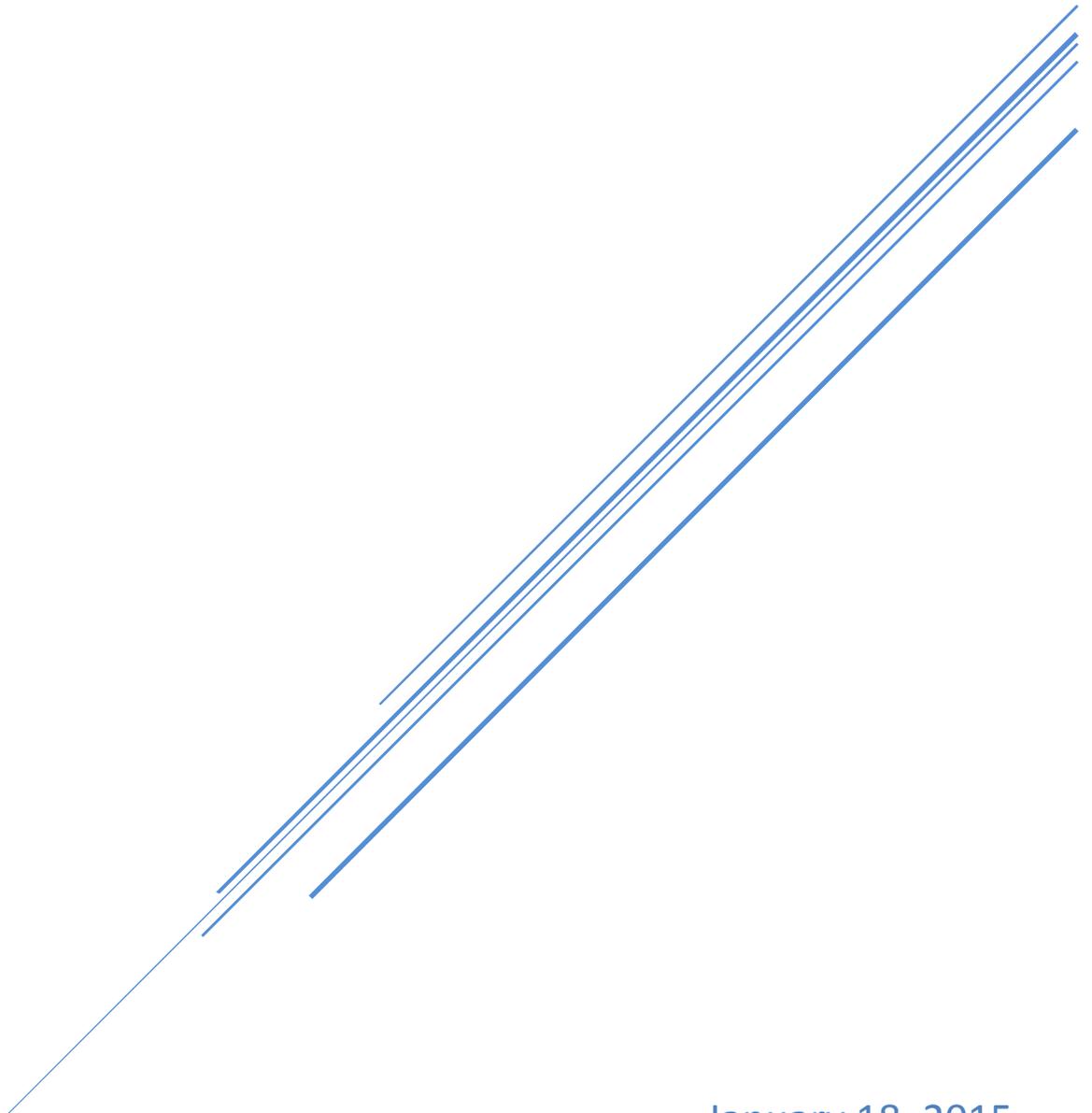


COME & SEE

John 1:43-51



January 18, 2015

Millions of children have learned to play the violin by the Suzuki method since it was launched by the Japanese violinist in the late 1950s. Children start playing an instrument as young as possible, preferably around the age of three, and learn by playing the same short pieces repeatedly from memory.

To back up his credibility as a teacher, Suzuki claimed that he had spent eight years as a private student of Karl Klinger, a leading violinist and professor at Berlin Hochschule in the 1920s, during which time he said he also befriended Albert Einstein.

But a number of critics are now presenting evidence that Suzuki lied about his training and background, accusing him of being a fraud. The most recent includes proof that Suzuki, the son of a violin maker, was rejected by Klinger and the Berlin Hochschule when he auditioned there in 1923, at the age of 24.

Mark O'Connor, a U.S. violin teacher and composer said, 'I think it is one of the biggest frauds in music history.... I don't believe anybody has properly checked his past.' Nobody checked. Or nobody cared.

To be fair, O'Connor's assertions have been contested by Suzuki teacher-trainer Lois Shephard, who studied with Suzuki, learned to speak and read Japanese, and has taught the Suzuki method. The International Suzuki Association, naturally, has also issued a rebuttal of these allegations.

We often ask about someone's background, don't we? More and more, background checks are a requirement when hiring a new employee. We want to know what credentials a person has, and by what authority they speak or act. Then, clearly, there are times when we don't really care about a person's background.

Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke with conviction and authority. We don't often ask about his credentials, nor do we hear much about them. I didn't know what they were so I Googled it. It's pretty interesting. King earned a Bachelor's degree in sociology from Morehouse College in 1948, received a seminary degree from Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, PA, where he was valedictorian of his class. While he was there he came under the influence of theologian Reinhold Niebbuhr, who became his mentor. He received his PhD in systematic theology from Boston University when he was just 25 years old. He was ordained in the same church where his father served as pastor, the same church his grandfather founded.

Not many of us know his educational background. But we do know him as an eloquent spokesman of the civil rights movement. We don't need to know his credentials to recognize Martin Luther king's witness to God in our society.

In the first chapter of John, we find several different reactions to Jesus. Some people respond based on what little they've heard. Others want to know his credentials. There's no wrong or right to it; in those days, people came to Jesus from a variety of backgrounds and perspectives. We still do.

From Jesus' simple invitation to "Follow me," Philip is convinced of who Jesus is. No "Let me think about it..." no prolonged Q & A session, no references or creedal statement. Philip simply responds in faith. And one of the first things he does is to share the good news.

Philip goes immediately to find his good friend Nathanael, but Nathanael is one of those people who just had to ask for credentials. And he is concerned by what he finds out. You see, Nathanael knows his bible. While Philip asserts that Jesus is the one spoken of by the prophets – prophesied even. Nathanael knows that the town of Nazareth is not where the prophets said the Messiah would be found. Nazareth is small backwater of little to no significance, after all.

So when Philip tells him that Jesus, who he believes is the Messiah, is from Nazareth, it's easy to understand Nathanael's skepticism. Nazareth isn't even mentioned in the scriptures, how can anything good come from there? Bethelhem? Sure. Jerusalem, maybe – but Nazareth?

Nathanael is so sure that nothing good can come out of Nazareth he doesn't even want to listen, but Philip encourages him. "Just come and see." You don't have to make any decision right away, just give him a fair hearing. Then decide.

What else can Philip say? He can't cite scripture to prove what he's saying. He can't refer to the teachings of the elders or the religious authorities. All he can do is ask Nathanael to take a risk – to risk an encounter with someone who doesn't fit the mold. Jesus doesn't fit Nathanael's expectations, but God doesn't always work in expected ways.

The crazy part of this story – or should I say, the miracle of the story – is that Nathanael does listen. In spite of his snarky comments about Nazareth, Nathanael takes a first step toward discipleship. He goes with his friend to meet Jesus.

Then, after listening to Jesus, Nathanael makes probably the clearest profession of faith you can find in any of the gospels, "You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"

Nathanael isn't the only one interested in credentials, either. Jesus takes a look at Nathanael and makes some pretty amazing observations about who he is, too! A true Israelite – in whom there is nothing false.” Which is pretty funny since Jacob founded Israel with the deception of his brother Esau over the birthright of the eldest son.

How did Jesus know that there is nothing false about Nathanael? Clairvoyance? Overheard conversation? Divine inspiration?

Jesus says he “saw him under the fig tree” but there isn't anything to indicate what he saw that makes him know so much about Nathanael. We don't know if the fig tree was where Nathanael conducted business, or held secret meetings. We don't know if he went to the fig tree to hide out, or make public speeches or have family picnics. Nathanael responds with such enthusiasm that we know that what Jesus says is true.

Nathanael apparently decides that something good can come out of Nazareth while Jesus wants to know if anyone else has seen the good he sees in Nathanael.

The same question could be put to us, of course. God sees us – under our fig trees we call life – and knows the truth of who we are. God sees all of the potential in each of us to reflect the glory of God in our world today. God sees the good in us and asks us to see the good in others.

It's the same theme that was often echoed in much of what Martin Luther King said and did. One of my all-time favorite quotes of his is from a speech he gave on the Mall in Washington DC. -- Or was it a sermon?

“I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.”

It's a dream that I have come to embrace because I have a similar dream. I dream of a day when society will see people's abilities, and not their dis-abilities. I pray that one day we will look at each other and see the credentials God gave us: that we are the image of God – and we are beloved.

King's dream has yet to be fulfilled in its entirety. We still look for different credentials. Where a person is from, what language they speak, what they do for a living, how they dress, who they love, even what color skin they have is still part of our judgment of another person. We still look and see differences before seeing what we have in common. It becomes a poor reflection of ourselves as the image of God when we give in to those attitudes of the past.

Jesus calls us to a new way of living, a new way of seeing, and new way of loving. Jesus is challenging our assumptions and inviting us to expand our limited visions.

In his book, *Unexpected Guests at God's Banquet*, Brett Webb-Mitchell tells the story of a pastor who was serving communion to a young boy with Downs's syndrome. As the bread was shared, the minister was overcome with the sudden awareness that both of them had a common dependence on God's gift of Grace. Both needed forgiveness and healing; and the boundaries that others had put on them in terms of their differences were suddenly insignificant.

Their credentials were simply a common calling from the creator: the only credentials worth claiming.

God sees the good in each of us and all of us. I believe that. I also believe that, more often than not, we thwart God's good intentions and limit what God can do through us.

One thing that doesn't come across in translation – it might be in your footnotes – is that after Nathanael's remarkable epiphany, Jesus begins to speak in plural. I almost wish the translators had come from the south; it'd make for a more accurate translation: "Very truly, I tell y'all; All y'all will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending" All y'all – that's us! Jesus isn't just talking to Nathanael anymore!

Picture this: whenever we open the doors of our little church or our little circle of friends, we swing wide the gates of heaven. And we slam them closed when we shut people out. We close the very gates of heaven ourselves. And when the gates of heaven are closed, Jesus gets shut out, too.

Our doors must be open. And not just these little church doors, you know what I mean? It's hospitality. It's seeing the beloved community God created -- in God's image! It's *Namaste*.

I don't know who the last person you invited to church was, but the story of Philip and Nathanael is the perfect segue for pastor to start talking about inviting friends to church. They challenge us to invite someone. Invite a neighbor, a coworker. Invite a friend, invite a stranger, but invite someone!

And don't you worry about their credentials – God has already taken care of that. And if they're concerned about our credentials, just say what Philip said, "Come and see." Because there are good things happening here and I am not ashamed to invite people in to see it for themselves. God is at work here. I can feel it. Come and see.