

Epiphany 2B 2021 Sermon

John 1:43-51

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

“Can anything good come from Nazareth?”

In the culture of the 1st-Century Mediterranean world, origin was destiny. Nazareth was an obscure, “hick” town, way out in the boondocks of Galilee. So small and insignificant is Nazareth that it is not mentioned once in the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament. When Nathaniel asks, “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” he is simply revealing the attitude that most Jews who were from Judea would have had toward someone who came from a small town in distant, rural Galilee.

And Nathanael’s jumping to conclusions about Jesus without ever meeting him reflects a tendency, I think, that a lot of **us** have (at least, I know **I** do): the tendency to label someone in a negative way, even before we meet them or know anything about them – except, perhaps, one fact. We may know, for instance, that a person whom we have never met belongs to the opposite political party from ours. We might say, out of hand, “Can anything good come from a Democrat?” or “Can anything good come from a Republican?” We may have never met the person – just as Nathanael had never met Jesus. And yet we pre-judge that person because of their political party; or perhaps because of the color of their skin or their nation of origin or their socio-economic status, or whatever. As Richard Rohr says, we tend to lead with “No” rather than with “Yes;” tend to lead with judgment rather than welcome.

And when we do that, it is easy for our judgment to become self-fulfilling. We begin to see *other* negative things about that person (or group of people). These things may be true, or they may be false, or imagined. Over time, we may not even be able to distinguish what is true from what is false or imagined. If our negativity toward another person (or group of people) is allowed to fester, we might even invent lies about them, or concoct stories in which they are seen in the

worst possible light. That's what some of the chief priests and scribes did when they brought Jesus before Pontius Pilate (Luke 23:2), resulting, eventually, in the torture and crucifixion of the One who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. (John 14:6)

My friends, I think that this is the kind of thing that has been happening in our own nation recently – and probably for quite some time. A person or group of people, some of whom we have never met, are nonetheless pre-judged, disparaged, ridiculed, belittled, mocked, scorned, vilified. Stories are contrived: conspiracy theories, imagined horrific scenarios which will undoubtedly transpire if that other person or political party is allowed to “win.” And “winning” becomes everything, even at the cost of truth; even at the cost of other people's lives.

“Can anything good come from Nazareth?” Nathaniel asks Philip.

But notice how Philip responds. He doesn't engage Nathaniel in an argument. Rather, he says, “Come and see for yourself.” And, to his credit, Nathaniel goes.

We are then told that Jesus, upon seeing Nathanael coming toward him, says, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” If **Nathaniel's** first reaction to Jesus was negative (even before he met Jesus), Jesus' appraisal of Nathaniel is just the opposite. He sees good – exceeding good! – in Nathaniel; even before they formally meet. Whereas the Old Testament Patriarch Israel was known, in his early life, as someone who was deceitful, this “true” son of Israel, Nathaniel, shows, in his being, no deceit at all. He is thus open to the one who, according to what John has told us earlier in this chapter, brings “grace and truth.” (1:17)

Nathaniel had never met Jesus; but it seems that Jesus, somehow, already knew Nathaniel. I can only imagine that this is, for Nathaniel, a bit disconcerting. “Where did you get to know me?” Nathaniel asks, perhaps with a mixture of wonderment and wariness. And Jesus answers, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.”

Now, *whatever* “seeing him under the fig tree” means (and Bible scholars have many opinions on this), it undoubtedly expresses a deep knowing, beyond our usual human way of “getting acquainted.” Fr. John Shea notes that “the type of knowledge Jesus has of Nathanael is **heart** knowledge, a grasp of his core being, his foundational goodness.”¹ Suddenly, Nathanael knows that he is known, at the deepest core of his being. And he intuits that such heart-knowledge can come from no other place than from God. And so, in a breathtaking leap from skepticism to total trust, Nathanael exclaims, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”

Now, I think it fair to say that the number of people out there, in the world, who truly know us, *really* know us, are few and far between. Perhaps a parent, a sibling, a spouse, or a very close friend has come to know *something* of who we **truly** are, and accepts us, warts and all. To have but **one** such person in our life is an incredible gift! And yet, even those who know us best do not know us *completely* and *fully*; indeed, we **ourselves** do not fully know the depths of who we truly are! As St. Paul said, “Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.” (1 Cor. 13:12, NRSV) Even as I have been fully known. That verse comes in the middle of Paul’s majestic poem on **love**. To be fully known, Paul implies, is to be fully loved.

Our Psalmist today, like Nathanael, has also experienced what it is like to be fully known. And it blows him away, too. He writes:

“Lord, you have searched me out and known me; ... you are acquainted with all my ways. Indeed, there is not a word on my lips, but you, O Lord, **know** it altogether. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me...” (Psalm 139:1a, 2b, 3, 5a)

Nathanael began this story having labeled Jesus according to where he happened to be from. And that **one** fact about Jesus, that he was from Nazareth, is almost enough for Nathanael to dismiss Jesus, write him off, before he even meets him. And, if we are honest, my friends, don’t you and I do the same? We may have never met a person, or group of persons, and yet because we know one fact about them – that they are a Democrat or a Republican, that they currently do not have a home, that their skin is a different color, that they were born in another country, that they are poor, or whatever – that one fact can be enough for us to not only write off a person or group without ever having even met them; it can morph into imagined stories with no basis in truth or reality. Stories in which that other person or group becomes the villain, the enemy, whom we can then justifiably disparage, ridicule, belittle, mock, scorn, vilify, hate, and even inflict harm upon. People whom we have never even met.

The fact that Jesus is from Nazareth does **not** determine his identity. No fact about a person ever does! Indeed, knowing certain *facts* about a person gives us no *heart*-knowledge of them whatsoever. And it is Jesus’ *heart* knowledge of Nathanael, knowing him at the level of his very being, that blows him out of the water, and transforms him.

Today’s Gospel story could not be more timely, my friends. For, like Nathanael, many of us are initially quick to judge and write-off someone who carries a label we don’t like, or think not worthy of our attention. Nathanael almost wrote off Jesus, without even meeting him, saying, “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” For us, the question may be, “Can anything good come from a Democrat, or a Republican?” “Can anything good come from a homeless person? An undocumented migrant worker? A convict? A Muslim? Someone from Iran?” – what have you. But Nathanael gives us an example to follow. For,

despite initially believing that Jesus could not possibly be good because he came from Nazareth, he nonetheless accepts Philip's invitation to come and see for himself. And not only does he discover that he could not have been more wrong; he discovers how deeply and fully he is known and loved by the Son of God.

AMEN

1 John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005, p. 41