

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

John 1:43–51

Preached by Rev. Patrick Hunnicutt on January 14, 2018, the Second Sunday after Epiphany, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, VA.

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.”

In our text today, Philip, the newly minted disciple, says to Nathanael, the new recruit: “We have found him about whom Moses and the prophets wrote: Jesus, son of Joseph, from Nazareth.”

“Nazareth?” he asked. “Can *anything* good come out of *Nazareth*?”

Truth be told, Nazareth *was* an insignificant little town. Its tiny population brought little to the table but religious and historical irrelevance and economic dependence upon other more prominent cities. If we were to put words into his mouth, we might imagine Nathanael saying, “Why would we want to have anyone from that — ‘sink-hole’ — of a city?”

Nathanael, you see, was stuck. Stuck in himself, stuck in his own ignorance, stuck in his own constricted view of reality. So Philip says to him, “Come and see.” Indeed, Nathanael would come to see that something very good, could come from Nazareth. He would come to see beyond his preconceptions and prejudices the joy of heavenly possibility. The story of this text, and the hope of this sermon, is to see how that came to happen.

It begins with acceptance, without which, Nathanael might still be stuck in his own sink-hole. Philip said “come and see,” and Nathanael went and saw. His willingness to go, and see, enabled the decisive moment of this story to occur...of Jesus seeing Nathanael coming toward him, and saying, “Truly, here is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!”

Remember, they had never met. “Where did you come to know me?” Nathanael asked. The Greek word here is “pothen,” which means “from whence”, or “how is it?” Even as he denigrates Christ’s origins, Nathanael desperately wants to know from whence Jesus comes...what’s his vantage point, how is it that Jesus could know him so well?

Nathanael does not know what we, the readers or listeners of John know from the opening chapter of the gospel, that in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. Nathanael does not know that Jesus was in the beginning with God, that all things came into being through him, and without him, not one thing came into being (see John 1).

Jesus does not answer Nathanael with this poetry of theology. He simply tells Nathanael, “I saw you, under the fig tree, before Philip called you.” Christ’s seeing, and his knowing, change everything for Nathanael, who comes to see that being known by Jesus, is to know Jesus. “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! The King of Israel!” he exclaims. There is such power in knowing that you are fully known. If we were to put again words into Nathanael’s mouth, we might not use phrases from the news, but the words of the Psalmist quoted in our call to worship: “O Lord, you have searched me, and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up. You search out my path...and are acquainted with all of my ways. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me. It is so high, that I cannot attain it.” (Psalm 139)

It is so high. And yet, Jesus says there is more to come, more to attain. “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you? You will see greater things than these. You will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the son of Man.” In other words, it only gets better.

Isn’t that the hope we bring to this worship? That things get better? Each of us brings our own individual needs and wants, but we share a common desire that the world we live in, the selves we occupy, the people we encounter, all move beyond constriction, beyond prejudice, fear, illness and hurt to a place of joyous freedom and possibility. We desire, like Nathanael, to get unstuck.

If Nathanael’s encounter with Jesus has anything to say to this desire, it is that transformation comes first with some level of acceptance to an invitation that is always there for us: “Come, and see.” Westminster is not an altar call church...because of our Presbyterian emphasis is on the gift of grace in Jesus that we cannot earn or merit or manufacture, we do not ask people to come forward to be born again, or ask whether they have accepted Jesus into our hearts. But we cannot ignore the basic fact that experience of new life involves an act of acceptance, an acted-upon willingness and desire to move beyond our own disinclinations and say yes to God’s invitation. To move beyond ignorance, in ourselves, and in others, we must be willing to extend and respond affirmatively to the invitation to follow, to come and see.

That invitation is ours from Jesus, and it has been transmitted to the disciples through the ages. In 2010 and 2015, it reached our youth, who were invited to come and see Haiti in mission. They accepted, and saw a nation littered with terrible poverty and deprivation, yes. But they also beheld a country and a people who are beautiful in strength and rigor. On those trips, our youth came to know the Haitians, and vice versa, and that knowledge, as it was for Nathanael, was wonderful, for the Haitians, and for them. Being known is a wonderful gift that moves all of us beyond ourselves, and toward our hopes of a better life and a better world. As visitors to Haiti, our youth were not their saviors, but as Christ’s disciples, they played a role in Haiti’s salvation, and Haiti played a role in theirs.

We are, as Martin Luther King Jr said, caught up in an inescapable network of mutuality and tied together in a single garment of destiny.

On this weekend when our nation remembers King’s sacrifice and legacy, we can remember the letter he wrote on the blank scraps of newspaper cobbled together in a Birmingham jail in 1963. He wrote that letter in response to a statement by white clergy in the city, including a prominent Presbyterian, that dismissed King and his movement as troublemaking by “outsiders.” They, too, could not believe that anything good could come from the Nazareth-like outposts of the world.

From his “pothen” of imprisonment, King wrote his hope that the “deep fog of misunderstanding” would lift from his nation’s “fear drenched communities.” In our being imprisoned by our own deep fears, we too should hope for the fog of misunderstanding to lift as well. This is not a political statement, or advocacy for or against a particular policy. Segregation was not, and is not, just a matter of politics or policy. It was, and still is, a continuation of Nathanael’s practice of prejudice, of pre-judging the worth of another person based on where he is from racially, ethnically, culturally, economically, spiritually, geographically, and refusing to know him as he truly is, as a child of God.

Although King's movement worked toward political and policy objectives, his famously articulated dream was not the passage or defeat of a particular piece of legislation, a specific court ruling, or the victory or defeat of a political candidate. His dream was for a world where his children could live where his people were, like Nathanael, fully known, where they were not "judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character."

Being known is so wonderful...it is a gift so high, we ought to try very hard for others to attain it.

To move this discussion from the realm of national discourse to level of personal interaction, let's consider how it is we relate to one another on a one-to-one basis. How would our interactions be different, if we acted less in pursuit of our own self-disclosure, and instead, towards offering someone else the gift of being more fully known? Maybe I am over-exaggerating, but it seems to me, we are losing the ability to move beyond ourselves to really listen to one another. King referred to this as a "tragic effort to live in monologue, rather than dialogue."

Notice how often, when someone says something that happened to them or shares how they feel, how quickly we or others jump in right away with a sentence that goes like, "well I (this), or "I" (that). What if we chose to respond to what someone shares, not with a statement about ourselves, but a question, that enables us to come and see the person for who they are more truly, and more deeply?

Social media is a wonderful tool, but it also can degenerate into a stream of self-proclamation, each of us at all times issuing press releases to say what we saw, what we did, how we feel about this or that or the other thing. Maybe instead of trolling the comments section, we might beautify our social networks by offering more genuinely interested questions of others, than self-interested proclamations of ourselves.

In pastoral care, as deacons and pastors, when we visit with the elderly or sick, we seek to practice what we call "deep listening." This involves resisting the urge to offer solutions to problems or magic words that will make them feel better, but instead offering an invitation for them to share their story and offering them our own authentic desire to receive their story. The hope is to convey to them that wherever they are, in whatever they may be facing, we have come to see them so that they may know that they are fully known in Christ. We have been so gifted in recent years to receive the gift of storytelling. It will serve us, and others, well, if we also remember to offer others the wondrous gift of story-hearing.

As hearers of Nathanael's story, we are to remember that like Nathanael, we are fully known by Jesus, who sees us from a vantage point that goes all the way back to the beginning, and looks ahead to a great future where angels ascend and descend from heaven in the company of the Son of Man who is our Savior and friend.

If, like Nathanael, we are to move beyond whatever ignorance and prejudice that exists in and around us, we must accept the invitation to come and see the one in whom we are fully known. Where can that happen? What is the "pothen" of that place?

(At Lord's Table) It is here, at this table.

Here, we remember, that the Lord Jesus, on the night of his arrest, took bread, and after giving thanks, he broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take, eat. This is my body, broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

And in the same way he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant, sealed in my blood, shed for you, for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink it, do this in remembrance of me."

This is the Lord's Table. Come, and taste, and see, that the Lord is good, and that yes, good things do come from places like Nazareth. Amen.