



SERMONS THAT WORK

Epiphany 2 (B)

Out of Nazareth

[RCL] 1 Samuel 3:1-10 (11-20); Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17; 1 Corinthians 6:12-20; John 1:43-51

Can anything good come out of Nazareth?

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus finds Philip and says to him, “Follow me.” A little later, Philip finds Nathaniel and says to him, “We have found him about whom Moses and also the prophets wrote, Jesus from Nazareth.” To which Nathanael responds, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

If we are being honest, we probably have to admit that there is a part of us -- the unredeemed, smart-aleck part -- that admires this question. It manages to be smug, demeaning, and dismissive all at the same time. It's smug: *I know what is good and what is not good, and I'm happy to make blanket judgments about whole groups of people.* It's demeaning: *I'm glad to define every man, woman, and child in an area in terms of their location.* And it's dismissive: *Nazareth... bunch of idiots, right.*

Perhaps those of us who grew up in New Jersey can picture our adolescent selves saying something like, “Can anything good come out of Newark?” For the record, Philip Roth, Stephen Crane, Paul Simon, Allen Ginsberg, and Supreme Court Justice William Brennan were all born in Newark. “Can anything good come out of the Jersey Shore?” Well, Count Basie, Norman Mailer, Jack Nicholson, Bruce Springsteen. “Can anything good come out of Hoboken?” Francis Albert Sinatra!

Yet, if you grew up in New Jersey, you also have probably been on the receiving end of questions like these. Tell someone that you're from New Jersey and you're likely to hear them snicker and say, “What exit?” To which the smart aleck usually says something like “Exit 7, where you also get off in order to go to Princeton University, which has had over 35 Nobel prize winners, which you might have known if you weren't from such a cultural backwater!”

So, perhaps we might begin to see a question like Nathaniel's isn't all that helpful.

Notice, however, that in our Gospel lesson, Philip does not respond like this. Rather, he just says to Nathaniel, “Come and see.” This response is so mature, and, well, so Christian, that it reminds us what

kind of person we may hope to grow up and be someday. Philip just lets the smugness and dismissiveness in Nathaniel's question pass, and he invites him to come and see Jesus for himself.

How often have we wished for such Christian maturity, especially in retrospect after the kneejerk, ill-tempered retort? When one of these new atheist types says to us that religion and Christianity have been responsible for every social evil known to humankind, we wish we hadn't responded by asking if they have ever read the New Testament. Or heard of St. Francis of Assisi, or Thomas Merton, or Dorothy Day, or Martin Luther King. Or by pointing out to them the studies that show religious people are more likely to give to charities than non-religious people. We wish we would have just said, "Why don't you come to my church sometime and meet some people, who are tutoring kids, feeding the hungry, praying for peace, making music, worshipping God? Why don't you come and see for yourself?" We wish we could be more like Philip.

But, alas, we have to admit that oftentimes we are more like Nathaniel even when it comes to dealing with people in our churches. How often have we expressed attitudes shaped more by popular culture and social media than by Christian charity in speaking of bible thumpers from the South, tree huggers from California, and looney libs from the Northeast? Have you ever tut-tutted whole groups of Christians, shaken your head, and exclaimed, "Can anything good come out of that church?"

We may take some comfort and derive some hope from our Gospel because, for reasons we are not told, Nathaniel takes Philip up on his invitation to come and see Jesus. But you may have noticed that something unexpected happens on the way. Instead of Nathaniel seeing Jesus we are told that Jesus sees Nathaniel and says of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Notice, Nathaniel doesn't see Jesus first. Rather, first, Jesus sees Nathaniel. And then, rather astonishingly, he says of Nathaniel, who had just asked the smug and dismissive question about "anything good coming out of Nazareth," that he is a "true Israelite in whom there is no guile." This is extraordinary because Jesus knows what Nathaniel just said about Nazareth, and yet he does not, as one might be tempted to, get into Nathaniel's face and say, "I heard you talking trash about my hometown." No, despite Nathaniel's trash-talking, Jesus says that Nathaniel is a true Israelite. And in this act of Jesus seeing Nathaniel and declaring him to be righteous, I think we see the salvation of his soul. The Lord knows what Nathaniel said – he saw him under the fig tree before Philip called him – and nonetheless, Jesus sees him, and he loves him, and declares him a true Israelite. When it comes right down to it, when it comes down to our eternal salvation, it's not a matter of us finding Jesus, but rather of him finding us. The Lord sees us, warts and all, and he speaks a truth that makes us righteous despite ourselves, despite our smugness and dismissiveness. And it is only then that Nathaniel is able to say, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"

My brothers and my sisters, we can take comfort in this because it is the only hope we have of ever becoming true Christians. Left to our own devices, we are smug and self-righteous and dismissive. It is only by the grace of God and by people like Philip that we have heard the invitation to come and see the real Jesus. And, even then, our only hope is that he will look at us, and see us for who we are – people who grew up in our own parochial backwaters, running our mouths and wagging our fingers – and nonetheless

will still say, “Here is truly a person in whom there is no guile, here is someone for whom I have given my life to heal and make whole, here is my beloved child who will see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

Can anything good come out of Nazareth?

Can anything good come out of the church?

Come and see.

Better yet, come and be seen.

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