

# **“Where did you get to know me?”**

**1 Samuel 3:1-10 (11-20) and John 1:43-51**

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**Second Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**Douglas J. Brouwer**

**<sup>43</sup> The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, “Follow me.”**

**<sup>44</sup> Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. <sup>45</sup> Philip found Nathanael and told him, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.”**

**<sup>46</sup> “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” Nathanael asked.**

**“Come and see,” said Philip.**

**<sup>47</sup> When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, “Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.”**

**<sup>48</sup> “How do you know me?” Nathanael asked.**

**Jesus answered, “I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you.”**

**<sup>49</sup> Then Nathanael declared, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel.”**

**<sup>50</sup> Jesus said, “You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that.” <sup>51</sup> He then added, “Very truly I tell you, you will see ‘heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on’ the Son of Man.”**

**The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

Dear friends of Jesus Christ,

It’s good to be with you one last time before I ride off into the sunset.

Those words – to “ride off into the sunset” – are an English idiom. Cowboys in the American west used to ride off into the sunset at the end of the movie – usually after shooting a lot of people.

Just so you know, I'm not planning any violence on my way out of town, so maybe I should look for a different idiom. The truth is, I am going to leave with a full heart, a heart just filled up with good memories of my four years with all of you at IPC. I am filled up with gratitude for my time here.

It's been a rich experience for me personally.

Living in a new culture – bumping up against other cultures and other ways of seeing the world – has been challenging for me, but in a good way. I will return to the U.S. a changed person, presumably a person with a bigger and more generous perspective about the world.

I don't see how you can have an expat experience and NOT be changed by it.

Last week the President of the United States referred to Africa and Haiti in language that I refuse to use in the context of worship – or anywhere else, for that matter. I'll call it vulgar and leave it at that. But here we are tonight in a church with many members who come from African countries.

There are no members from Haiti at IPC, as far as I know, but I have been to Haiti – several times, in fact – and I was even able to preach there one time in a small Episcopal church.

And I want you to know that I do not share the President's point of view. I am embarrassed about the language he used. And I believe – I didn't have to come to IPC to learn this – but I believe that all of God's children deserve to be treated with dignity and respect, no matter where they are from.

Interestingly, cultural stereotyping and prejudice show up in our scripture reading for tonight from John's gospel. Remember Nathaniel's comment: **“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”**

This urge to see other people as a cultural or racial stereotype is nothing new. That doesn't make it right, of course, but it's not new. Nazareth in the first century was not a great city, by all accounts. It's not a great city today either. But I had been born in Nazareth, I would stand here and tell you that it's the greatest city God ever imagined.

In any case, the gospels contain several of these fascinating details having to do with another person being somehow different because he or she is from another culture.

Most of you know the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman, and in the conversation that Jesus has with this woman, her “otherness” (and what that means) is more interesting, in some ways, than the healing that occurs at the end of the story. There are all of these references in the conversation to her cultural and ethnic background, which add tension to the conversation.

At one point, Jesus calls her a **“dog,”** or **“puppy,”** which is how first-century Jews referred to Gentiles, especially Gentiles from this area called Syro-Phoenicia, which is different from Phoenicia. I read somewhere last week that people adopted the term Syro-Phoenicia because they didn't want to be confused with Phoenicians. And so it goes.

Anyway, the word **“dog”** is a jarring word to hear from Jesus' mouth, and he says the word, I think, I believe with all my heart, with a knowing look, or with a twinkle in his eye, but there it is.

She's different. She's not one of us. He knows it, and so does she.

And then – and even bigger issue in the gospel accounts – the Samaritans show up in the gospels as a cultural group that is despised and looked down upon. And Jesus, who always turns our ideas and our ways of looking at the world upside down, Jesus refuses to see Samaritans *as his contemporaries saw them*.

To Jesus they were human beings, deserving of dignity and respect, even female Samaritans. He refused to see that Samaritan woman at the well as anything other than a child of God. In fact, his conversation with her startled his disciples, and they were embarrassed or not sure what to do when they found him having an actual conversation with her.

In tonight's gospel reading, from the first chapter of John, Jesus is calling a group of disciples. All four gospels tell the story of what happens in these early days of Jesus' ministry – how he got started, the steps he took, and so on.

Matthew, Mark and Luke have a version of this call process, and if you've never read their accounts, you should do that. But then, as always, John has a different version, a far different memory, a different point he wants to make.

All four gospels show us Jesus calling his first disciples in the Galilee region. Jesus' ministry, it seems clear, begins in the north. And John – I think this is interesting – John mentions Peter and Andrew, who figure prominently in the other accounts, but John's focus here is not on Peter and Andrew, but rather on Philip and Nathanael, who don't receive much attention in the other gospels.

As a matter of fact, Nathanael doesn't show up on any of the biblical lists of disciples. Did you know that? You can look to do some fact checking, but you won't find Nathanael on any of those lists. He doesn't seem to be one of "the twelve." But clearly he is important to this story, and I will come back to his importance to the story in a moment.

Let me just say, as a further introduction, that these stories are fascinating and revealing. I love to think about them and imagine them. I love to go there in my mind's eye.

I have been to the shores of the Sea of Galilee where these call stories take place, where Zebedee was mending the nets with his sons, James and John, and so it's easy for me to imagine what must have taken place.

I have heard people say, **"Oh, if I only had been there, you know? If only I had seen Jesus and heard him teach and heard the Sermon on the Mount for myself, then it would be so much easier to believe. If only I could have observed Jesus's ministry first hand, then I would have no problem coming to faith."**

But if you have said those words – or words like them – then here's what I would say to you: I don't think being there would help you very much. Maybe, but I don't think.

If you had been there to see and hear all of this, you would have seen these men Jesus called to be his followers up close. You would have noticed that they were – how do I say this? – poorly educated, most of them. Their speech was not polished. No trace of a university education.

Their personal hygiene – this is just a guess of course – but their personal hygiene might not have been so good. Most of them had never been to a dentist. These guys were rough. The work they did – most of them, maybe Matthew was an exception because of his work as a tax collector – but the work most of them did was manual labor.

They were not the sort of people we would gravitate to during the fellowship time after church. **“Oh, what academic field are you in?”**

No, that was not who these men were.

And yet, these were the men whom Jesus called to be his disciples. These were the men who were going to change the world. Not the cultural elites, not the university educated, not those who score well on achievement tests. But these men.

To Philip, Jesus said, **“Follow me.”**

And apparently Philip did just that. Amazing! There are always going to be people like Philip. He saw ... and he believed. Nothing more was needed. I am not like that, sorry to say, and – frankly – I envy people who come to faith that way. I resist and I argue and I find reasons not to follow, and so the Philips of this world put me to shame.

In fact, Philip not only responded to Jesus’ invitation, he also went out to find Nathanael and evangelized him. Philip said (and the excitement in his voice is palpable): **“We have found the one described by Moses and the prophets – Jesus, son of Joseph, from Nazareth.”**

And immediately – it’s shocking how quickly Nathanael pours cold water all over Philip’s excitement – immediately we hear Nathanael’s sarcastic response: **“Nazareth!? You must be kidding! Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”**

We have all done this. We have all judged someone – I regret using the word “sarcastic” here because it’s more than that – we have all judged someone without knowing very much at all about them. One tiny bit of information is sometimes all we need to form an opinion.

Nazareth? Forget it. I’ve heard enough.

Assuming all of you here tonight are okay with Nazareth and have nothing against people from that city – it’s now the largest city in northern Israel, by the way, mostly Arab, mostly Muslim, in case you are looking for reasons not to like it.

But I’m curious, if it’s not Nazareth, then what triggers your own judgments? Is it city or country of origin? Is it native language? Is it skin color? Socio-economic class? Sexual orientation?

We all have these trigger points, reasons why we judge other people. And they are embarrassing – or they should be embarrassing – because when we give in to them, when we allow them to shape our opinions, we sometimes miss what is truly important, and significant, and what God has in mind for us to see.

Philip’s response to Nathanael’s sarcasm – I’m giving him the benefit of the doubt – was wonderful. You should memorize and use it whenever you find yourself confronted with prejudice and bias and bigotry.

Philip said: **“Come and see.”** See for yourself.

What I like about that response is that Philip doesn't argue with Nathanael. He knows him too well. They have had this conversation before. No amount of arguing and persuading is going to change his mind. Bigotry is irrational. You can't come up with an argument to change the mind of a bigot.

So, Philip simply says, **“Come and see.”**

And those are the words we should use as well. **“I challenge you,”** we should say, **“I challenge you to put yourself in his presence and see for yourself.”**

When you are talking with someone about Christian faith, someone who doesn't want to hear it, someone who judges you for believing it, you should say, **“Come and see.”** Or some variation on those words. A challenge to move beyond bigotry or prejudice.

So, to Nathanael's credit, he goes along with Philip to meet Jesus, and Jesus says, **“Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.”**

Another translation puts it this way: **“Look, here is a genuine Israelite, there is no guile in him.”**

Well, that's odd, isn't it? What is Jesus talking about? Clearly, there is more to Jesus' comment than we hear 20 centuries after the fact.

Scholars believe that John (the gospel writer) is using Nathanael here as a symbol of Israel coming to God. That's Nathanael's role in the story. That's the reason Nathanael doesn't show up on the biblical lists of disciples.

Don't get me wrong. Nathanael is a real character. He's not made up. But in John's way of telling the story Nathanael plays this symbolic role of representing all Israel.

The New International Version translates the Greek here as **“an Israelite in whom there is nothing false, or in whom there is no deceit.”**

But that's not quite right.

The Greek word used here in verse 47 is the word for **“guile,”** which can also mean craftiness, being tricky, underhanded. There aren't many biblical characters who are described as being full of guile, but there is one – the most famous trickster of them all. And his name was Jacob.

In fact, God renamed him Israel. So, what the earliest hearers of this story heard was this: Jesus said, **“Here is an Israelite with no Jacob in him. Here is a son of Jacob who is not a chip off the old block.”**

There's even a reference in the last verse of our reading for tonight to angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man, so John the gospel writer is leaving no doubt about what is happening here. That's a reference to a dream that Jacob once had at a place he called Bethel.

So, this is Israel, finally, who is not Jacob. And Jesus is glad to see him. Jesus welcomes him. And Nathanael – this is stunning – Nathanael comes to belief rather quickly and says, **“Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel.”**

Look, the last point I want to make tonight is that Jesus is still looking for disciples. He was never going to do this work alone. He had a major role to play. Of course. A decisive role. He had to do something that none of us could do.

But at some point, the rest of the job was going to be ours, the clean up, if you will. Jesus came and died and rose again. And then, he leaves. And gives over a piece of himself, his Spirit, to us, because we are going to need it. We are to continue his work of making disciples, calling people (like Nathanael) to faith.

And here's the shocking truth. We are no better than the original group. Remember that I characterized them as uneducated, and as having bad hygiene, and bad teeth? Well, they did okay with what they had. They did a remarkable job with their bad educations and bad teeth.

And then they turned over the responsibility to us – with a far greater advantages than they had. And how are we doing?

You know, it's easy – and fun, I have to say – to put down the disciples. They are so easy to mock and criticize. You read the gospels and you find that time after time they don't get it, they misunderstand, they try to get good jobs in the kingdom of heaven (that's true), and we feel so superior to them.

But tell me, How are we doing?

Over the years, I have looked around at gatherings of pastors. I even started this at seminary. I would look around and think, **“You've got to be kidding. These people are going to lead the church to victory? No way.”**

I had a seminary classmate from Bayonne, New Jersey, and – I'm ashamed of this now – but we referred to him as “Bayonne Bob.” Bayonne was like Nazareth, nothing good ever comes out of Bayonne.

But Bayonne Bob graduated along with the rest of us and heard God's call to Australia, which surprised us because we didn't think that Bob would ever find a call. But Bob was called to Australia where he established a church. It wasn't the first church ever established in Australia, but it was a new church.

And – here's the thing – that church grew and grew and grew.

Somehow, and I am ashamed right now to admit this, but somehow God used Bayonne Bob to grow a church larger than any of his classmates ever served, in a country where church going is not quite as accepted as it is in the U.S., where it's relatively easy to establish a church.

Somehow God uses a lot of people who don't look like they can get the job done. People like Peter and Andrew, Philip and Nathanael, James and John, whose nickname was “Sons of Thunder,” remember? Like a motorcycle gang?

God uses people like that. God uses you and me ... to grow his church and grow his kingdom. And it starts with a simple invitation. Follow me.

Do you think you have what it takes? You probably don't, but that doesn't matter. God will give you what it takes.

Follow me.