

Epiphany 2 Year B 2021 January 17, 2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In stories like today's gospel reading, I am very aware that the Bible usually only tells us what a character says and what they do. Now you might be thinking, "Sure that's really all there is, right?" Well, there's tone and demeanor, and all the things that go into communication that aren't the words we say. Our gospel story this morning is a great example of this lack of extra information. We might be able to easily infer Philip's tone as very excited, not just some dry communication of facts. But what about Nathanael's response? We know he asks a question, but how does he ask that question? Nazareth was a small backwater town, far away from both Rome (the seat of power in the empire) and from Jerusalem (the center of Jewish religious life at the time). Nathanael could be asking an honest, though uncharitable, question. But it isn't usually understood that way. We usually read it as though Nathanael is being sarcastic. "Can *anything* good come out of Nazareth?" From there, we often understand Philip's response as almost coy, "Come and see," like he knows something that Nathanael doesn't.

Of course, there's another way we might read this interaction. We could read Nathanael as being "that guy". You know that guy. He's preening, sarcastic, and arrogant, always thinking he's way smarter and better than everyone else. He's similar to Tony Stark in the first Iron Man movie or the many depictions of Sherlock Holmes. He's always cracking jokes, always has a quip in response to those around him, and never seems to take things seriously.

All of this seems like fun and games. It's fine to see characters like Tony Stark quip and snark their way through a movie adventure, or even to have a friend who can be preening and sarcastic to sometimes lighten the mood by, maybe uncharitably, cracking wise. But there is a darker side to all this, isn't there? Nathanael asks like it's a question, but he's certain that he already knows the answer. No, nothing good can come out of Nazareth. At best it's a snide quip, at worst; it's an expression of prejudice disguised as a joke.

We see it in our world too. We see these snide jokes, these casually shared prejudiced remarks. But this is how hate speech spreads! Memes, and tweets, and Facebook posts that are "just jokes" but are also racist, sexist, homophobic, and hateful. The internet seems to be a place where a whole bunch of "That Guy"s can come together and egg each other on. And in these last few weeks, we've seen the results of hate speech. We can read in the news about the lives that are lost because one person or a group of people feel superior over another group of people. We see it in the violence that just last week flooded our capitol.

Maybe Philip sees Nathanael's comment for what it is, an expression of prejudice, maybe Philip's answer isn't coy. Philip knows that he cannot reason Nathanael out of his worldview. If Philip is exasperated it's because he's tired of trying, he's tired of being told that "it's just a joke" or that he should lighten up. He tells Nathanael to come and see, because he truly and genuinely wants his friend to see. Because by seeing, his mind might be opened.

When Mason was in college, he met a man named Jerry. He had graduated from the same school a few years earlier. Jerry was from a coal mining town in western Pennsylvania. Now, coal mining towns tend to be insular and intolerant, and this one was no different. So, Jerry was taking a big step when he went away to college, away from his nearly 100% white hometown. And while he was there, he encountered people of color for the first time. He became friends with other students of African descent, and Latina/o students, students from Japan and Southeast Asia, even Muslim and Indian students. Jerry was a religion major, but in the course of taking his

mandatory core classes in science, philosophy, psychology, and other diverse subjects, he met a truly diverse student body. And he began to see the error of his prejudiced upbringing. It all clicked for him when he was learning about the story of Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well. He realized that in that story, Jesus transgresses normally understood boundaries of race and religion to create a meaningful, even saving relationship with the woman. Jerry later reflected that he thought this was the biblical proof he needed to argue against the racism that pervaded his upbringing in his hometown. So, one weekend while he was home from school, he was given the opportunity to preach at his hometown church about that very story. And he told them about how Jesus' mission caused him to transgress socially understood racial boundaries. But the congregation didn't appreciate Jerry's new interpretation of this story, and he was politely asked to never preach in that church again.

But Jerry's time away at college was a chance for him to come and see. He had an opportunity that the people in his hometown hadn't. Because of new relationships, Jerry's worldview had changed, but his hometown had not. By the time he spoke to Mason's class, Jerry had learned the hard way what Philip seems to already know: that you cannot reason someone out of their prejudices, you can only invite them into authentic relationships.

This is the genius of Philip's reply: come and see for yourself. And so, Nathanael does. Nathanael follows Philip and encounters Jesus. And when Nathanael encounters Jesus, a relationship is formed. It's bigger than Nathanael's prejudice, and it leads Nathanael to name Jesus rightly.

Despite what happened at Jerry's church, when Mason met him, Jerry was an advocate for intentional school integration and diversity efforts. His call was to help create transformative relationships. The talk he gave in Mason's class was part of that call. His life-changing relationship with his classmates drew him deeper into his faith, and brought him from an insular and intolerant upbringing into a life where he advocates for justice and peace.

God invites us into these same relationships. In baptism, we are joined with the body of Christ, and we are called by Jesus into life-changing relationships with God and with our neighbors. This is the life of faith. As the body of Christ, we are made brothers and sisters with all the people of the world, brought by the Holy Spirit into relationship with people who are vastly different from us. We are called to act with compassion and understanding, to work together to form relationships with people who are similar to us, and with people whom we might not like or agree with. We are called to be One Body, One Family, saved and loved by One God and One Savior Jesus Christ.

Along with these transformative relationships we receive a promise, the same promise that Jesus gives to Nathanael, that greater and more wonderful things are on the way. God promises that the salvation and the community that we experience in this life is only the beginning, that we will be a part of God's saving and redeeming work in all the world and that at the last we will know victory over death. We will receive mercy and life from God, and know God face to face. Thanks be to God. Amen.