

THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY | JANUARY 14, 2024

1 SAMUEL 3:1-20 | PSALM 139:1-6, 13-18 | 1 COR. 6:12-20 | JOHN 1:43-51

“Where are you from?”

It’s usually a benign question, a way to fill an awkward silence or to find something in common with someone we’ve just met. When they tell you they’re from Denver or Cleveland, you might respond, “I visit my uncle in Denver all the time.” Or, when you really have to stretch, “I’ve been to the Cleveland airport.”

But it can be a suspicious question, too. Think of its slight variant, “Where are you *really* from?” These are questions meant not to find common ground but to make people explain who they are and justify why they’re here.

This is the tone that Nathanael’s question about Jesus carries in today’s gospel reading. “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Nathanael doesn’t know Jesus. But he knows—or this he knows—Nazareth. He knows what kind of place it is and what kinds of people come from there. And so Jesus can fulfill every other prophecy in the book, but if he grew up in the wrong zip code, Nathanael isn’t going to give him the time of day.

It isn’t difficult to find of this kind of essentializing thinking, reducing people down to where they come from or some other characteristic. It could be racially profiling people who are in “our” communities.¹ It could be judging someone’s character simply by the neighborhood or country they were born in. Or even just using the name of a city or neighborhood as a way of moralizing a social problem.

This kind of logic is ignorant at best and malicious at worst. And hopefully, most of us recognize how harmful those kinds of stereotypes can be to other people and to ourselves. (If you think judging people based on negative stereotypes is good then we should probably chat after Mass.)

So I want to take Nathanael’s question in a slightly different direction. Because Nathanael suffers from a much more basic problem than his misconceptions about Nazareth. His problem is that he has a very fixed view of other people’s characteristics and abilities. He has a little bit of information about Jesus’s past, and he thinks he knows exactly where he’s headed.

Many of us, including me, fall into Nathanael’s pattern of thinking rather easily. Of making assumptions about what kind of person someone will be based on where they are right now or what they’ve done in the past. And—here’s the tricky part—we do it even when we’re trying to lift people up and do good things.

I’ve been thinking about this a lot recently because this weekend was our annual board retreat for Cross Roads Camp, our outdoor ministry we share with the Episcopal Diocese of Newark. And a lot of our work involves identifying people from around the state who are good at particular things. So you might say, we need to find someone with a site and facilities background to help with a renovation. Or we need someone with a finance or accounting background to help a budget issue. And what’s the word that we use for these people? We say that they’re gifted. And that we need to find someone with a gift for x, y, or z.

¹ From the ELCA’s social statement on criminal justice. “For example, this church expresses grave objections to patterns of racial, ethnic and religious profiling. Although some police departments have adopted robust policies to counter the problem of racial bias, discrimination remains and carries many harmful consequences. Profiling — whether intentional or unintentional — stigmatizes those who are innocent of any offense. It alienates members of the public who come to view the justice system as antagonistic rather than as a safeguard to all people’s rights and property. Extensive efforts must continue until discriminatory profiling ends.”

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We use this kind of language around church all the time. Part of our welcome statement says that we “recognize the worth, dignity, and gifts of everyone as a child of God.” We like that image of giftedness because it emphasizes that our talents come from God. We might even say that someone, a child maybe, is “preternaturally gifted.” Their abilities must have come from somewhere outside of themselves.

But the problem with talking about gifts this way is that they become categorical. You either have the gift or you don't. If you have the gift, great. You're set for life. And if you don't, too bad. There's nothing that you or anyone else can do about it. Even when we're talking about good things like the gifts that God gives us, we tend to talk about them in a way that's fixed.

And if that's the way you see the world, you'll end up a lot like Nathanael. When something or someone new comes into your life, you'll try to sort them out. Do they have the gift or not? Are you from Nazareth or not? Yes or no answers only. Tell me your past or present, and I can tell you your future. It's a very human perspective.

Today's reading from 1 Samuel gives us God's perspective. And it's remarkably different than our own. Pay attention to how Samuel is introduced in this story. “Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.” Nathanael would look at someone like Samuel and say, *Doesn't know the Lord. Doesn't know the word of the Lord. Can anything good come from Samuel?*

But notice those two little words that the author of this story adds. “Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.” Not yet.

Those two words can cast an entirely new light on other people. Because instead of assuming that other people are limited and their potential fixed almost from birth, it assumes that there are new possibilities. People can learn. People can change. People can grow. People can evolve.

God does not call Samuel to be a prophet because God thought Samuel has the right skill set for it. God equips Samuel to be a prophet by calling him. We look at Samuel and say, *No way*. But God looks at Samuel and says, *Not yet*.

And that can change the way we view ourselves, too. I know when I invite people to participate in various things around church, they often respond with, “That's not really my gift.” Or, “I can't do that.” I wonder how you might shift your own thinking by making that small little change. “I don't have a gift for that yet.” Or “I can't do that yet.”

It's telling that the author of 1 Samuel introduces this story by mentioning that when it happened “visions were not widespread.” Visions were not widespread among Samuel and Eli's contemporaries. St. John tells us that lack of vision was an issue for people like Nathanael. And we know that our own vision can often be constrained and obscured.

But God's vision for our neighbors and ourselves is bigger than our gaze. And where we see only limits and roadblocks, God sees potential and promise.

And so the important question for us isn't just *Where are you from?* The important question is *Where are we going?* And the answer is right at the heart of today's gospel reading. “Come and see.”

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