

January 14, 2018

John 1: 43-51

Prayer: Dear Lord, We pray that we not make Jesus in the image of ourselves but rather re-make ourselves in the image of Jesus. In his name we pray, Amen.

In Our Image

During my first few months at Triune back in 2005, Vince and I were having dinner downtown. We ran into a woman I had once interviewed for *The Greenville News*.

She asked about our work here, and we chatted for awhile. And like many moms do, she said she wanted to bring her high school daughter some time to volunteer.

In those days, we had a clothes closet, and I told her we could use her help there on Wednesday mornings. She gave me a date when she and her daughter would come.

This was back in the days before we had a computerized database, before we had social workers or nurses or attorneys, before coffee and pastries, before our prayer circle, before the art room -- before all our wonderful volunteers brought their gifts to our Wednesday operation.

So on that day, it was just two staff members and me working to give out groceries and clothes, and keeping tally by hand. I kept looking for this woman and her daughter. I asked the staff several times if they had come in, and they said no.

Finally, at the end of the morning, I described the woman to a staff member and asked, “Are you *sure* you didn’t see her?” She replied, “Oh, that woman and a young girl *did* come in. But they stayed 20 minutes, said, “We gotta get out of here!” and left.

Needless to say, they never came back.

A few years later, the city hired a design firm from Miami to plan a new Stone Avenue corridor. The design firm set up shop in a storefront down the street. They invited community members to attend brainstorming sessions to decide what Stone Avenue should become.

I walked into the planning center one day and saw some maps that the neighborhood groups had been working on. And on one map was Triune, circled in red. I was curious so I leaned in closer. And written beside it was “Problem area.”

Well, it hurt my feelings, and I slunk out, hoping no one would recognize me.

Because the local woman couldn’t stand to be with us..., because the neighbors wrote something ugly on a map..., I was gratified when some of our North Main Street and Earle Street and James Street and Brutontown neighbors began visiting us. I was thrilled that they wanted to come and *see for themselves* what was going on.

One woman wrote a check and attached a note. It read: “As a longtime North Main Street resident, I’ve watched a neglected historical cornerstone take on new life, from its spruced up exterior to the many needed outreach ministries you serve. Please accept this donation in honor of your incredible work.”

And twice now, the CEO of a private foundation has stopped by with a \$20,000 check. She owns property along Stone Avenue and gets mad when she thinks people aren't treating us fairly.

She came over right before Christmas and asked, "Is anyone still bothering you?"

First impressions are not always accurate, are they?

Things we think we know are not always true. That's the story of us, anyway. And I think that's the story of our increasingly polarized nation. All the screaming and finger-pointing occurs when we are so dug in to our view of the world that we are unable and unwilling to hear anything else.

That's similar to the story we will read in today's Scripture. It comes as Jesus was calling his disciples. He had already called the brothers Andrew and Simon Peter. Please turn with me in your Bibles to **John 1: 43-51** and let's see what happened next.

⁴³ The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.'⁴⁴ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter.

⁴⁵ 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.'

⁴⁶ Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?'

Philip said to him, 'Come and see.'

⁴⁷ When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!'

⁴⁸ Nathanael asked him, 'Where did you come to know me?'

Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.'

⁴⁹Nathanael replied, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!'

⁵⁰Jesus answered, 'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.'

⁵¹And 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.'

Can anything good come out of Nazareth?

Can anything good come out of that political party? Or that one?

Can anything good come out of that crumbling old church on the corner?

The only way to know is to "come and see." That's what Jesus invited Andrew to do in the preceding verses. And that's what Philip invited Nathanael to do.

Come and see.

All we can do is live in the most transparent and honest way possible, and invite people to come and see.

To me, one of the most significant points of the Christmas season we just completed was God's intentional, deliberate plan to be born in a dusty backwater of the Roman Empire. His intentional, deliberate plan to live in a town so small and so insignificant it was never mentioned in Jewish Scripture. He might as well have been born in Poe Mill.

That's why Nathanael was so disbelieving. Why would the mighty God of Moses and the prophets choose to live in a place like Nazareth? It made no sense.

Philip didn't have an argument for it. He didn't even try.

Come and see, he told his friend. *Just come and see.*

When people want to visit us but are only interested in what goes on next door, I fear they are missing the point. If they don't understand that Triune is a church, and that everything that goes on over there grows out of worship over here, they will never understand us.

So often, our faith, our Christian story, doesn't make worldly sense. I preached a funeral once that an atheist attended. Afterward, he called and asked if we could meet.

He came to my office and asked *why* anyone would believe in Christianity if it couldn't promise some sort of reward. Some sort of worldly success.

I told him yeah, I hated that, too. But it most certainly *does not* promise success. Quite the opposite.

The Jews living in the Roman Empire and certainly the Zealots were looking for a Messiah with a little more oomph, a leader to overthrow the Romans, a Savior to restore Israel to its glory days. I'm not sure we're any different today.

We know what we want in a Savior, what we expect. And if it doesn't match up with what we learn of Jesus, well, then we change Jesus. We experience cognitive dissonance when our beliefs don't match. So one of the variables must change.

We see that every election. Almost every candidate wraps himself in the cloak of Christianity, even if every word that comes out of his mouth is an affront to our Lord's teachings.

We all want Jesus to match *our vision* of what a Savior should be.

That's all Nathanael wanted. Someone important. Someone flashy. At the very least, someone from a more respectable place than Nazareth.

He wanted someone more in line with his tastes, his expectations. Probably, if truth be told, he wanted someone a little more like ... Nathanael.

Many of you know our youngest child, Madison. She has recently taken a job in San Diego, but was back to visit during the week of Christmas. Someone in California suggested she become a hair model. So she spent the week here tossing her head and asking, "Should I do it?"

When she was born, before I ever saw her, I heard the doctor say, "You've got a red-head!" And sure enough, we did. But unlike all the people I knew growing up who hated being called Carrot Top, hated their red hair, Madison loved hers.

When she was in kindergarten, one of her classmates told his mother he was going to marry the girl with the orange hair.

It made her so mad. "I don't have orange hair!" she told him. "It's red!"

The next year, she came home from first-grade Sunday school with a picture of Jesus. And she had colored Jesus' hair a bright, fire-engine red.

Never mind that Jesus was a Jew from the Middle East. In Madison's mind, he looked startlingly like her.

During one Advent, we had a lovely service in which artist Charlie Pate painted a giant canvas while Bryan Kirby played Christmas carols. Charlie started with a canvas covered in wet paint that was a burnt orange color. He began by sort of wiping a Madonna and Child into view, before he ever picked up a paintbrush.

So he ended up with pretty much ... a red-headed Jesus.

I went home that night and told Madison, "You were right! Jesus is a redhead!"

If you don't believe me, Charlie's painting now hangs in our dining hall.

What's the old joke? God made man in his image, and then man returned the favor.

Isn't that what we do?

Madison loved her hair and assumed her Savior would want to look like her.

Politicians decide what they want to do, and assume Jesus would back them up.

Nathanael assumed Jesus would be from an important place because he had created in his mind an image of what the Messiah should be.

So often, we decide what is right and wrong, and then we shoehorn Jesus to fit it. When it should be the other way around.

It is not surprising that Nathanael answered Philip's proclamation about Jesus the way he did. With skepticism. *Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*

The surprising thing was how quickly his meeting with Jesus turned him around.

Jesus saw Nathanael and employed some word play. He said, **“Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.”**

This was probably a reference to Jacob in the Old Testament. Jacob was re-named Israel, and was a deceitful person who stole his brother’s birthright through trickery.

Jesus was complimenting Nathanael’s integrity. Nathanael wanted to know how Jesus knew anything about him. Jesus answered, **“I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.”**

And Nathanael apparently believed instantly. Even Jesus was surprised at the quick turnaround. **“Do you believe because I saw you under a fig tree? You will see greater things than these.”**

In other words, Nathanael, you ain’t seen nothin’ yet. Two verses later, Jesus was turning water into wine, and the disciples began their wild ride.

More than the other gospel writers, John wrote a story about people who recognized Jesus and people who didn’t, people who moved into the light, and people who remained in the dark. The struggle between darkness and light is the basis for John’s prologue that introduces Jesus as a member of the godhead from the beginning of creation.

But let’s think for a minute about this leap into the light by Nathanael. What turned him from skeptic to believer so quickly? Here’s all Jesus said: **“I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.”**

I saw you.

I think it's the personal attribute that our God brings to relationship. He's not some golden calf off in the distance, but a living God to whom we can speak, cry, laugh, relate.

I saw you.

What is it that we sing in the old hymn? "O how I love Jesus ... because he first he loved me!"

We love God, we accept Jesus Christ as our Savior, because he loved us first. Ours is a response to a love that's been there from the beginning of time.

John began his story this way: **"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. ... And the Word became flesh and lived among us ..."** (John 1: 1, 14)

Became flesh, and for some reason known only to God, lived among us in a nowhere place called Nazareth.

I pray this morning that we keep our hearts and minds open, always open, to ways that God is working in unexpected places, in Poe Mills, in Nazareths.

Just as we hope our neighbors change *their* minds because of the consistency of the witness of this church, may we be open to changing *our* minds about the Nazareths of our world.

I pray that we not make Jesus in the image of our red-headed, power-hungry, big-city selves.

Instead, let us re-make ourselves in the image of Jesus.

Amen.