

Second Sunday after Epiphany

17.01.2021
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Introduction

The call of Nathanael provides a lesson about stereotyping; it also highlights the power of genuine connection to overcome distrust.

Text

John 1:43-51

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. 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." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see."

When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael asked him, "Where did you come to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." And 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."

Comment

There are several place names and references to physical locations in this passage: Galilee; Bethsaida; the city of Andrew and Peter; Nazareth; Israel. Each place name means something to the people in this passage and to John's intended audience. They are not just individual or isolated places on a map; they are points of active connection.

Often the mental connection we make to a place carries with it stereotypes and generalizations. Nathanael associates Nazareth with disappointment. It is not the place he would go for inspiration. We regularly use place names like Westminster,

DC and Hollywood as shorthand for loaded connotations. Useful rhetorical tools, but dangerous when they limit our ability to distinguish caricature from reality and generalisations from evidence.

Those looking to sermonise on how stereotypes and unwarranted connotations can exacerbate conflict and delay reconciliation will find an eager foil in Nathanael. His change of heart about Jesus of Nazareth provides a helpful example. However, while this passage follows Nathanael as he gets past his initial connection of 'Nazareth' to worthlessness, the passage as a whole speaks to the power of connections to build trust.

Yes, we can get lazy in our mental connections. Yes, our connections, when allowed to become narrow, limit our view of other possibilities. But just look at how John ties people together through the names listed in links in this passage. Jesus to Galilee to Philip. Philip to Bethsaida and Andrew and Peter. Jesus to Moses and then to the prophets; Jesus to Joseph from Nazareth.

It's in the actual (not imagined) connections that progress gets made. Nathanael is quick to jump to conclusions about Jesus of Nazareth even though he doesn't know him. But he does know Philip. Nathanael doesn't yet know what Jesus will be like, but he trusts Philip when his friend says 'this is about whom Moses and the prophets wrote.' It is because of their connection that Nathanael is willing to 'come and see.' And it is in Jesus making a direct connection to Nathanael, whom he saw sitting under a fig tree, that a sceptic becomes a believer.

As this passage suggests, our genuine, lived and active connections can help us to sort out perception from reality, to overcome the falsities and half-truths we too easily accept, and to trust that there is always more to be seen and discovered in the relationships we choose to follow.

Response

Knowing that there is a kernel of truth in any stereotype or generalisation, we can nevertheless trust that real-live three-dimensional humans will defy simplistic caricatures.

Take the time to list out categories of people we bandy about as shorthand in conversation: politicians, evangelicals, liberals, conservatives, Trump supporters, Christians, teenagers, Irish, British, Protestants, Catholics, atheists, southerners, northerners...

Think about stereotypical attributes we quickly assign to these categories.

Think then about multiple individuals you actually know who could be placed within those categories. Do they all match up with the stereotypical shorthand? Are they just as likely to defy as to confirm stereotypes? Do the individuals you know even fit neatly within a category?

Consider also the categories you may fall within and the intersections you may inhabit. How might your connections and behaviour overcome perceptions to reveal a more complex and inviting reality that others may want to 'come and see'?

Prayer

God who calls us to follow,
God who invites us to question:
you allow us to come as we truly are
and to see beyond
our limited view.
As we relocate ourselves
within the reach of your grace,
may our beckoning connections

lead us from our set positions
so we can gain a fuller sense
of the good news
we still can hear.

Amen

Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Reconciliation