

# SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

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Text: John 1:43-52, 6:42

Title: “Bread, Bath & Beyond: Beyond Belief”

One summer when I was dean of a canoe camp, I was waiting for the kids to arrive at Camp Kinawind along with the other volunteers who were serving with me that week. We watched as the kids arrived, many of them with nervous parents nearby, carrying luggage or backpacks or duffle bags for whatever camp their children were signed up for. My kids were not children but senior high students, so we were on the lookout for the tall, older kids, some of whom came on the bus the conference used to shuttle kids up north because parents either didn't have the means to get them there or just chose to have them used that mode of transportation.

We could usually spot our kids as they made their way to the registration table with no idea that we were going to be their guides that week. I had sent them an introduction packet with instructions on what to bring and how to pack for a week on the river, canoeing on the Black River in the Pigeon River National Forest, but they had no clue what I looked like. So the other volunteers and I would watch the line and try to pick out who we thought would be ours for the week.

When the bus arrived, I noticed two teens, a boy and a girl. As I watched them I thought he looked a bit cocky. Had a name shaved in the hair on the back of his head, “Mario”, and though I always work at checking my own prejudicial thoughts that arise out of early unjustified judgments about people of color, I confess when I saw Mario I was hoping he wasn't part of our group. Looked like he'd be a challenge just based on his look and the way he interacted with the others in line. The girl--who it turns out was his girlfriend--also seemed a little pushy and unhappy, and I was hoping she wasn't part of the group, too.

But guess what, when the person registering them saw what camp they had signed up for she pointed them my way and over they came each of them with what looked like a pillow case full of gear which meant not only was I thinking they might be a challenge but it appeared they had not even come close to reading the list of necessary gear I'd sent them complete with a thorough checklist. I was not looking forward to a week on the river with these two.

I know I'm not alone in making judgments like this. We watch people and depending on what thoughts we allow to influence us, we act according to whatever thoughts we allow to dominate when it comes to other people, especially people who are different from us. Often those inner judgments we make are just flat out wrong, unfair—even unjust. What we tell ourselves we believe about people based on our perceptions of them, can be harmful to them and to us because they can create very real barriers in the human family and we miss the gift of connecting with people who are also the children of God. What is it about us that creates this

sense of judgment and how in God's name do we get past it?

The Bible does not hide the fact that human beings have always had this habit of making such judgments, holding beliefs about a person based on where they are from or what they look like. Even Jesus suffered from prejudicial points of view. In the Gospel According to John, we have Jesus just beginning his ministry and he is calling disciples to follow him. First, Andrew and Peter in the verses preceding what were read today, and then Philip and Nathanael. Philip has already made a commitment to follow Jesus, and he goes off and finds Nathanael who is a bit of a nobody as far as disciples go. In the Gospels he is only mentioned twice and once he is referred to as Bartholomew. He is not a high profile disciple. But according to the story, Philip finds Nathanael and tells him they have found the One of whom Moses and the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth. I imagine Nathanael giving him one of those sarcastic expressions of skepticism as he launches his snarky remark, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?"

I know people who think that way about Saginaw or Flint or other places like small rural towns, say Crump or Kingston. Nobody who is anybody comes from such places. They're just common folk places where nothing exciting happens or if it does—in places like Saginaw or Flint--it's probably not very positive: shootings and drugs and slums. Where poor, desperate people live. What good could possibly come from such places? They aren't inspiring. The news is most often negative or non-existent. Can anything good come from Nazareth?

Nathanael has a clear prejudice against people who come from Nazareth. It's the "wrong side of the tracks" attitude he displays that has never gone away. It shows up all the time, most often times I suspect it's most alive in our thoughts about people. It's just that with Nathanael, he speaks his thoughts out loud. And those thoughts make it clear that he doesn't sound very open to the possibility that God might use someone from such a place as Nazareth to do good in the world.

But his friend Philip doesn't argue with him. He doesn't even try to convince him by challenging his prejudice. There is no confrontation here. All Philip tells him is, "Come and see." "If you don't believe me, then come and see for yourself."

There is a Word here for us in this time of significant change in the church, and I don't mean just this congregation but rather the church at large, the United Methodist Church and other mainline denominations. Back in the heyday of mainlines—the 1950's and 60's—churches did well. People came as churches were often the centers of social as well as religious activity. It was the thing to do—a cultural expectation--and so reaching out wasn't all that necessary because the culture was such that folks just did church. Beautiful churches were built and were thriving because they were supported by lots of people. There was a sense of "build it and they will come" kind of evangelism. No need to reach out because people just came.

But then things began to change. As children found careers outside of the family community, as skepticism rose about the church's relevance and the role of the faith community in people's lives began to be in question, the expectation of going to church for the sake of going to church--the cultural and familial pressure--faded. Over time the "build it and they will come" approach to growing a faith community no longer worked, and we have struggled with how to shift how we connect with people outside our walls. It's becoming clearer to me all the time that we can no longer grow the church by offering programs and expect people to come but rather as disciples like Philip, our new old calling is to go find the skeptical Nathanael's and

simply invite them by saying “Come and see.” “Come with me and see that where I worship is real and relevant, that God’s Spirit is alive and among the people. Real ministry is happening and people’s lives are touched in authentic ways. You can find meaningful relationships with people in my church. You can find Christ there. He plants a garden and gives the food away. He houses a food pantry there and people nearby can come when they’re in a tough spot. There are children there who dance and sing the story of Christ’s birth with such joy that even a donkey joined the celebration. He even has people traveling to Saginaw to spend a week with a bunch of people to not only help people on their homes but to build relationships where none existed before. There are people there who will pray for you and with you. Why Jesus has also sent some people who grew up there to foreign mission fields like Nigeria and Mt. Pleasant and Ohio and Fairview, Tawas and Chelsea. And last week he spoke through a “watered down” gospel baptismal renewal service to two older children who came forward after the service wanting to be baptized. Jesus is alive and active in my church.” “Come and See.”

In spite of his belief about people from Nazareth, Nathanael went with Philip to see this man named Jesus. Sometimes friends can insist that others step past prejudices in order to meet others they might otherwise disparage because of beliefs. Philip challenges Nathanael to do so by inviting him to come and see Jesus for himself.

So Nathanael, carrying his belief that nothing good can come from Nazareth, follows Philip to see Jesus. And as they are approaching, Jesus announces, “Here comes an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.”

Some scholars think Jesus has in mind the story of Jacob, the one who was deceitful as he stole his brother, Esau’s, birthright, the one who would be called Israel after whom the nation was later named. And that makes sense given Jesus says at the end of this reading, “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” A vision based on Jacob’s ladder, a vision indicating that Jesus is the connection between heaven and earth as the ladder in Jacob’s dream connected him with heaven, with God.

Jesus here has a sense of humor. Rather than admonishing Nathanael for his prejudicial thoughts, he pokes fun at him by comparing him to Jacob who was a bit of a shady character but whom God still used in powerful ways. Jesus affirms Nathanael’s reputation for being straightforward but also suggests he isn’t perfect as he compares him to Jacob who wasn’t either.

Nathanael doesn’t know how but clearly Jesus knew him in a way that didn’t seem possible. Now he sees that something good and powerful could come from Nazareth. In fact, the Son of God, the King of Israel, has come from Nazareth, that backwater little village where no one who is anyone lives. Nathanael had to overcome his wrong belief before he could follow Jesus, before he could really see and know Jesus for who he was.

Throughout the week of canoeing on the river the year that Mario and his girlfriend were part of our group, I learned quickly how wrong I was about the initial impressions of this kid with his name shaved in the hair on the back of his head. Mario wasn’t the challenge so much as a couple of teens from the suburbs who I had to threaten to send home if they didn’t shape up. Turns out Mario was a gentle soul. He was always offering to jump in and help do whatever needed doing. Turns out he and his girlfriend had never been on a trip like this before. They were from Detroit. The wilderness was new to them. They didn’t have sleeping bags and so each of them just brought a blanket. Didn’t have a lot of the gear on my list, so they came with what they had, which wasn’t a lot. There was one incident involving the two of them, and the three of us went for a walk, so we could talk about it. But on the last night of our time together,

at the closing fire, I asked if there was anything anyone wanted to share before we left the next morning, and Mario—gentle Mario with his name shaved on the back of his head—said he was sorry for the disruption he had caused the group. He meant no harm, and he wanted the group to know that this week meant a lot to him and so did the people in the group. Silence all around.

It's an amazing thing when Jesus shows up and breaks down the walls of prejudicial beliefs. Jesus calls us beyond such thoughts. I'm not saying we shouldn't be wise about people. I'm not saying we are called to be naïve about every human being with whom we have contact. Please don't get me wrong. There are dangerous people in the world, for sure, and we need to be wary.

Yet, this passage challenges us to be careful about being so careful that we unjustly judge someone who comes from "Nazareth". Jesus challenges us to be open to go beyond our belief in order to see him, know him. Nathanael would have missed Jesus altogether had he not had someone insist that he come and see for himself, and he still would have missed Jesus if he refused to let go of the mistaken belief that nothing good could come from such a place as Nazareth. Only when he got past his prejudicial belief did he come to know Jesus and understand that Jesus already knew him.

So do you have anything of Nathanael in you? If so, what are those beliefs that might keep you from an experience of the risen Christ? Are there any Marios in your thoughts? How might Jesus be challenging you to move beyond beliefs that build walls rather than relationships with others who are also children of God?

I want to close with a video clip called "Imago Dei" which simply means image of God. Can you see the image of God in these faces? As we watch, consider asking the question: "What beliefs about difference might Jesus be challenging us to overcome?"