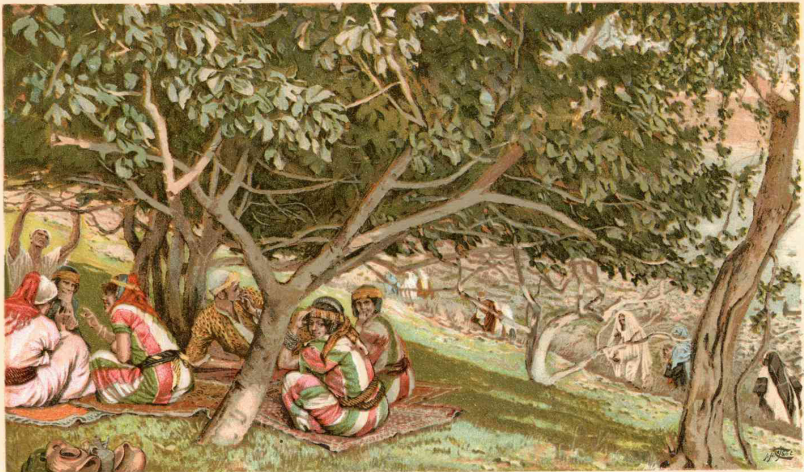


January 14, 2024

# The Second Sunday after the Epiphany

The Reverend Joseph Kimmel  
St. Anne's in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

**John 1:43-51**



*Nathanael under the Fig Tree*

J.-I.T.



“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” In 21st-century America, this question, posed by Nathanael to his buddy Philip about Jesus and his hometown, would be classified as a “politically incorrect” question. “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” This kind of question is essentially the first-century equivalent to a slight against a person’s identity; in our context, somewhat akin to—roughly speaking—posting something on Facebook that criticizes another person for being from a certain country, having a particular ethnic background, looking or dressing in a certain manner, lacking education or financial resources, or making some other type of personal criticism against another human being. And, to our culture’s detriment, our dominant and standard way of responding to these kinds of politically incorrect—and even morally, ethically wrong—statements is to simply cancel the other person. They do something bad that offends me or that I simply don’t want to be associated with, and so rather than taking the time and effort to try to work through the issue with them, I simply block them, unfriend them, or passive-aggressively freeze them out and stop interacting.

This kind of knee-jerk, easy-way-out reaction has so come to characterize American society’s response to the mistakes, and even serious moral wrongs, of other people that in recent years it has received its own special phrase: “cancel culture.” Ranging from minor social media misunderstandings to major immoral infractions (as highlighted, for instance, by the MeToo movement), our society’s primary response in recent years to errors both large and small has been self-righteous, knee-jerk cancellation. That person did something bad and I want to preserve my sense of being a “good person,” so I can’t be associated with them and their taint of badness, and therefore the easiest and fastest way to not get contaminated and thereby preserve my moral purity is to simply cut them off, cast them out, cancel them, end of story.

There are numerous flaws in this “cancel culture” approach, but the only one that we as Christians really need for us to be persuaded not to use the cancellation method is that Jesus models a different way—and not only a slightly different way, but a manner of responding to those who mess up, to those (like ourselves) with flaws and failures, that is diametrically opposed to a culture of instant cancellation.

Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus’ response to sinful others is consistently characterized by two qualities that John highlights explicitly earlier in chapter 1. In 1:14, very early in his description of Jesus, John writes plainly that Jesus is the one who comes from God with “truth

and grace.” Jesus is not just all truth with no grace: that would be merely pointing out people’s shortcomings, giving them the cold, hard facts of their failures without any hope of healing or redemption. But at the same time, Jesus is not just lovey-dovey, anything-goes grace. No, Jesus is remarkably rare—even utterly unique—in his ability to perfectly combine just the right amount of truth to wake people up to what they’re missing out on, how they’re diminishing their own lives by not living in concert with God’s reality—just enough of this truth—with just the right amount of grace to express that their failures are not the end of the story, that there’s still healing and redemption and growth and salvation awaiting them if they’ll just turn and accept it.

In John’s gospel, we see Jesus’ masterful deployment of grace and truth at the very beginning—here in the scene with Nathanael—and again at the very end, after Jesus’ best friend Peter has denied him three times. While that discussion with Peter will need to wait for another sermon, this morning I’d like for us to look a little more closely at this interaction between Jesus and Nathanael: we’ll see not only how Jesus’ “truth and grace” response dramatically changes Nathanael but also how it offers us a way to respond to others’ errors in a way that is so much more wise and loving than the standard methods of “cancel culture.”

First of all, Nathanael messes up: as we just saw, he makes an inappropriate, derogatory comment about Jesus’ hometown. He basically puts Jesus down by insinuating that Jesus must be some kind of backwater, country bumpkin from the no-name town of Nazareth. If Jesus were the typical 21st-century Facebook user, that would be the end of their relationship, because following our cultural protocol, Nathanael would simply be cancelled. Jesus would unfriend him and would gossip to Philip and their other buddies about what a terrible person Nathanael must be to ask such a classless, demeaning question, and then Jesus and all his friends would feel very upright and self-righteous as they all collectively shamed and shunned Nathanael for his mistake. But this response would not be “grace and truth.” Instead, the actual Jesus adopts a set of responses that utterly amazes and even transforms Nathanael, and these responses are guided by the twin actions of truth paired with grace.

Then, Jesus responds with truth, but a very particular kind of truth. We might expect Jesus to confront Nathanael directly with the truth of his error: “Why did you make that derogatory remark about me?,” we might imagine Jesus saying. “That was a snide comment which is inaccurate and which I don’t appreciate.” Such a reaction would definitely be an understandable statement of truth, and indeed, in

some situations, explicitly naming the wrong is exactly the type of truth that needs to be expressed. But here Jesus, in his divine wisdom, knows that just pointing out the error is not really what Nathanael needs. He needs to be encountered by a much more profound and life-altering truth, and so rather than rushing up to him to highlight his mistake, Jesus reveals to Nathanael Jesus' own supernatural ability to know all things. In other words, Jesus encounters Nathanael not with the truth about Nathanael's sin but with the truth about Jesus himself: "You might think you know me," Jesus effectively says, "but I saw you when you were sitting under the fig tree well before we ever met. The truth that you need to know," Jesus declares, "is that I am the Word who was with God and is God, and that truth is going to clear up all your concerns—not to mention your snide remarks—about me growing up in no-name Nazareth."

So on the one hand, Jesus lays some serious truth down upon Nathanael, but it's not an aggressive, confrontational, in-your-face kind of rebuke, so much as it's a revelation to alter Nathanael's way of seeing and thinking about the world and the people around him. A revelation about divine Reality—that yes, God appears in little backwater, forgotten, impoverished hamlets like Nazareth, a revelation that rocks Nathanael's world and causes him to do a spiritual and psychological 180, as he then confesses in amazement, "You are the Son of God."

And then, perhaps most remarkable of all, after delivering this life-changing truth, Jesus pairs it with otherworldly grace. According to our cancel culture, after Nathanael responded in awestruck wonder, Jesus should have said, "Yeah, Nathanael, you're darn right I am the Son of God, and for insulting my hometown, you're out of my club. I had good things planned for you, but you messed up, and so you're out, goodbye." But in his love, the love we as Christians are called to follow and practice ourselves, Jesus' shooter and chaser is a cocktail of truth chased with grace. He transforms Nathanael's life with truth about himself, and then says "Do you believe I'm the Son of God, Nathanael? Good, well I've got even more amazing things planned for you. Come follow me; come be a part of my team that's going to change the world."

How can Jesus extend this tremendously gracious offer to someone who just mocked him? How can Jesus get beyond Nathanael's insult to begin forming a friendship with him? "Well it's easy for Jesus," you might say, "because he's God and he has on-demand access to God's love." While yes, that is theologically correct, Jesus still has to

channel and apply that divine love in specific situations to individuals like Nathanael who are not necessarily so easy, even for Jesus, to love. So how in this specific case does Jesus start loving Nathanael? In a very practical and concrete way, let's look at how this plays out when the two men first meet. Jesus' very first words to Nathanael after the latter's insult are a declaration of Nathanael's basic identity: "Here," announces Jesus, "is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit." Jesus' very first interaction with Nathanael is not to call out his insult, or even to convey the life-altering truth about Jesus' own divine nature. Instead, Jesus' very first statement to Nathanael is a declaration of Nathanael's basic nature. "Here," says Jesus, "is someone who is truly without deceit." In other words, "When I see you," says Jesus to Nathanael, "I see someone who is pure, who is free from any deceit or falsehood." Now, this is a profoundly puzzling statement, because in fact the very question that Nathanael just deridingly posed against Jesus ("Can anything good come out of Nazareth?") was itself a misleadingly false question: because, clearly, while Nathanael has implied that "no, nothing good can come out of that backwater town," the fact that Jesus himself comes out of that backwater town shows that Nathanael's perspective and mindset are flawed, based on a bias against people from Nazareth that is not true, a false prejudice which fosters his "deceitful" question. But then Jesus comes along and the very first thing he says to this flawed and false figure is "Nathanael, I truly see no deceit in you." In other words, "Nathanael, you might have just implied something false in your prejudiced and derogatory question about me, but I see no falsehood in your deepest self, in your inner nature, in your heart of hearts. I see you, Nathanael, for who truly are—your soul standing naked before me—and I say that you are true, you are good. And knowing you in your essence, who you most fundamentally are, I love you, Nathanael, and I call you to join me in my mission of loving the world."

And this morning Christ looks into each one of us, and he says the very same thing; over and over he says it because it is so hard for us to believe: "I see you," says Jesus, "where you are sitting right now in your pew; I see into your heart of hearts, and I know all that you've done good and bad, but I'm not focused on those externals right now, because I'm looking into your deepest heart. And it's really important that you hear the truth about yourself—that you are good and pure and loved—and also that you hear the truth about me—that I am the Son of God who loves you and invites you to join me in transforming our world together."

And when you hear Jesus say these words deep in your soul, how

do you respond? What do you say back to Jesus?

I pray that each one of us may have the courage, like Nathanael, to take up the offer posed to us by Jesus in his grace and truth, that we each may truly hear both the truth about our deepest selves and the truth about Christ and his love for us. Hearing this, I pray that we each may confess along with Nathanael “You are the Son of God,” and then, following Jesus’ lead, go out into our families, communities, schools, workplaces, and rather than perpetuating a superficial and self-righteous culture of instant cancellation, may we serve instead as channels for Jesus’ life-altering, world-transforming love, truth, and grace. Amen.

