

The Second Sunday after the Epiphany
January 14, 2018
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1 Samuel 3:1-10
Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17
1 Corinthians 6:12-20
John 1:43-51

There are no unfriendly churches, at least no unfriendly Episcopal churches.

If you don't believe me, just ask an Episcopalian.

In my experience every Episcopal congregation thinks of itself as warm and inviting. Unfortunately, the rest of the world didn't get the memo. In some circles, Episcopalians are known as God's "frozen chosen" – stereotypically cool and aloof, rather than warm and inviting.

If the "disconnect" between how we see ourselves and how we're seen by others bothers you, I have a few modest suggestions to offer: be the change ... be warm and welcoming; wear a nametag; maybe take some initiative and introduce yourself to someone you don't know.

There's a risk in doing so, of course. I suspect we've all had the experience of introducing ourselves to someone we thought we'd never met – at church perhaps – only to have the other person respond with details about when, where and how you first met ... and how long you've sat in the same pew together on Sundays. That's awkward, embarrassing. Maybe it even leaves us feeling a little exposed as less than socially perfect.

Today's gospel is full of friendly introductions. It starts actually before where we pick things up this morning, with John the Baptist. He saw Jesus and pointed him out to his disciples: "Look," he said, "here is the Lamb of God." Two of John's disciples left to follow Jesus. One of them was named Andrew, and he got his brother, Simon Peter, to come along next (John 1:29-42). And then, as we heard this morning, Jesus goes to Galilee ... and that's where he finds Philip (who was from the hometown of Simon and Andrew) and Jesus invites Philip to come along with them. And then, of course, Philip goes and brings Nathanael.

But for all the personal connections and warm invitations, introductions don't always go well. Sometimes they get awkward. We see that, as well, in the morning's gospel.

When Philip first tells Nathanael about Jesus, Nathanael is kind of a jerk. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" he says. Nathanael, it seems, came from Cana, and Nazareth was a nearby podunk town in Galilee. So maybe it's just a local rivalry, a bit like someone from Eugene grumbling derisively, "Can anything good come out of Corvallis?"

Maybe. But it sounds more like he's just repeating a bias he'd grown up with, expressing a prejudice he internalized from friends and family. And he thinks it's okay to dismiss a whole people with a single dismissive remark ... perhaps one that includes an expletive!

If it's awkward for Philip, he doesn't show it. Philip doesn't exactly take Nathanael to task for his slur, but he does renew the invitation, hoping he won't settle for his preconceived ideas. Nathanael does, of course, "come and see" Jesus. And that's when it really gets uncomfortable.

At least as I imagine it, Jesus greets Nathanael warmly and genuinely. I imagine him with both hands on Nathanael's shoulders, a big smile on his face as he greets him, saying, "*Ah, now there's a real Israelite, not a false bone in his body, no deceit, no artifice.*"

If Nathanael's response was civil, maybe he offered a very polite "I don't believe we've met." But he seems rather more abrupt to me, having taken offense in that first moment, feeling that Jesus is being overly familiar and presumptuous. To my mind, it's a bit more like "*Where do you get off? You don't know me!*"

But Jesus doesn't take offense. He simply tells Nathanael he saw him under the fig tree before Philip called out to him. Now it's not entirely clear to me what Jesus seeing him under the fig tree really means, but it clearly means something to Nathanael. And what it tells him is that Jesus really does know him.

And that might seem like it could have been an awkward moment for Nathanael – a bit like introducing himself to someone who already knows him really, really well. But clearly it's not. And the only explanation that makes sense, at least to me, is that Nathanael immediately understands that in "meeting Jesus again for the first time" (if I can appropriate the title), Nathanael meets one who sees him as he really is, to see in him what John Shea describes as his "foundational goodness"ⁱ – who sees past his biases and prejudice and narrow-mindedness, and who sees the good in him, and the potential in him ...

(Now it's a bit of a digression but I'm reminded of something I read once about Martin Luther and his view of humanity and his understanding of salvation. It's a bit vague, but my recollection is that he said something along the lines of human beings being essentially cow dung covered over by snow ... so that God looks at us and sees us as clean and white. But we Anglicans hold (with Genesis) that we are essentially good, created in the image of God ... and marred by life and the sin around us. I think it's this latter idea that Shea is getting at when he speaks of our "foundational goodness.")

In any event, Jesus sees Nathanael deeply and intimately and loves him through and through.

And I hear something like that in reading from 1 Samuel as well.

We're told that the boy Samuel was lying down in the temple when God first called him. But he didn't recognize who it was who called, so he runs off to old Eli, saying "Here I am!" But, of course, it wasn't Eli who called, so he tells him to go back to bed.

It happens again. And, again, Eli tells him to go back to bed.

Now before it happens a third time, we're told just a bit more about Samuel. We already knew that he was just a kid; he hadn't done anything remarkable. But then this tidbit is added for us to consider:

Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord ...

He was serving God in the temple with Eli, but he'd never been properly introduced. So when God calls a third time, Samuel has no way of knowing who's calling.

Of course, Eli finally wakes up enough this time to figure who'd be calling at that time of night, and he tells Samuel how to introduce himself to the God he was already serving (should God call again). And when God calls again, this being the fourth time, Samuel welcomes the God who didn't stop calling, the God who already knows him, saying: "Speak, for your servant is listening."

It could have been awkward for the boy – again, a bit like introducing himself to someone who already knows him really, really well. But clearly it's not.

And the explanation that still makes sense to me is that in "meeting God again for the first time," Samuel meets one who sees him as he really is, who sees in him his "foundational goodness" – who sees past his youth and his inexperience, and who sees the good in him, and the potential in him ... God sees him deeply and intimately and loves him through and through.

And, of course, what I infer from these stories, what I think they say implicitly, is what the Psalm this morning says explicitly ... and powerfully and poignantly and, of course, poetically, right from the opening verses:

*LORD, you have searched me out and known me; *
you know my sitting down and my rising up;
you discern my thoughts from afar.*

*You trace my journeys and my resting-places *
and are acquainted with all my ways.*

Psalm 139:1-2

The Canadian priest and writer Herbert O'Driscoll says:

If we find it possible to say this [Psalm] without some sense of nakedness, we are not really taking in what it means. Think of the threat of being searched, or the threat of being completely and utterly known to someone else. There is no place to hide. Yet the psalmist is telling us that God has already searched us. Before God we are naked. No action I do, no thought I have, no word I utter, but [God] is acquainted with all my ways. ⁱⁱ

It could be awkward. We might feel uncomfortably over-exposed. But the psalmist contends that in “meeting this God again for the first time,” we are meeting one whom we have already met, one who knows us better than we know ourselves, one who sees past all our warts and biases and narrow-mindedness and inexperience and inadequacies, and who sees in us our “foundational goodness,” ... indeed, one who sees us right down to the molecular level and announces to us what we may not know – that, in God’s eyes, we are “marvelously made.”

Such knowledge may not change our reputation in the wider world, but maybe it’s enough to warm our hearts and possibly make us open to the wonder of another.

These readings all hint that there is something precious and golden in each of us, no matter how gruff and unqualified we may see to others or even to ourselves. John Shea says that Thomas Merton wrote eloquently about it. This is, in part, what he said:

At the center of our being is ... a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will ... It is so to speak [God’s] name written in us ... It is like a pure diamond, blazing light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we would see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely ... I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. ⁱⁱⁱ

There’s no program for how to do this, he says, but it is one of our tasks in this life to see – in ourselves and one another – what Merton goes on to refer to as the “secret beauty,” the “core of reality,” and “the person that each one is in God’s eyes.”

It’s not without risk. It may be awkward, but if we were to meet ourselves and one another “again for the first time” we might meet Jesus ... meet God “again for the first time” in the process. And, in so doing, we might see for ourselves the good that is in each of us, even in our very selves.

ⁱ John Shea, *Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Preachers and Teachers: Eating With the Bridegroom* (Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 2005), p. 41.

ⁱⁱ Hebert O’Driscoll, *The Word Today: Reflections on the Readings of the Revised Common Lectionary* (Year B, Volume 1), p. 70.

ⁱⁱⁱ John Shea, *Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Preachers and Teachers: Eating With the Bridegroom* (Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 2005), p. 43.