

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In the Gospel before us today, we hear of an Israelite by the name of Nathanael, in whom there is no guile or deceit...depending on how you want to parse out the Greek. Simply put, Nathanael was NOT sly, nor cunning, nor deceptive...he was a straight-shooter, you could say he was a man of few words, and when he spoke, you could trust that he was speaking from the heart. Now Nathanael is absent from the list of the twelve disciples but within the Gospel of John, discipleship is not defined in terms of the formal company of the twelve. So, I see Nathanael's role as one of us...one of us who knows that Jesus is the Lord or the very Son of God, but our words might unintentionally tell a different story.

Of course, Nathanael is the one who says this morning...can anything good come out of Nazareth. Now this comment can be heard as a put down, but since it comes from Nathanael, it can be heard as someone just simply speaking the truth about Nazareth, which was a town like so many other towns in the area of that time. Perhaps you are like me and heard this as a put down because we know towns like this. Can anything good come from...you all can fill in the blank because we all have made this statement in one form or another. Perhaps not the exact words were used but we all have made the same assuming and judgmental comment.

Can anything good come out of...well, I served a congregation for sixteen years in that place where it is assumed that nothing good can come from there. And to top it off, my mother was from that same place. Can anything good come from that place...yes, God can and does exist in those places as well as in this very place. God can and does exist in the very place none of us would be caught dead in, the last place anyone wants to be, this is the place where you find the very Son of God...Jesus Christ.....the light of the world that enlightens everyone. His light shines in this very place where we wonder if anything good can from it and here is the very light of God shining brightly on ordinary people, enabling them and us, to come forth and be part of God's glorious kingdom.

Looking past the comments then, within this Gospel lesson we learn then that Philip and Nathanael are from a very small fishing village on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee called Bethsaida. And we hear that Jesus decides to go to Galilee...a place known for being a hotbed of political activity and some of it violent at times, and he finds these two small-town fishermen wondering the streets of Galilee. We then hear that Jesus, the very Incarnate Word of God, the light of the world, the Lamb of God, the Son of Man and the very Son of God is in that same place, this politically changed and violent place, the same place where one has to wonder if anything good can come from it.

And in this place, Jesus meets Philip and says to him, two simple honest and straightforward words! Now these two simple words are not part of some deep theological understanding, these two words are not so profound that one cannot begin to comprehend them, these two words can be understood by anyone who hears them, even a toddler...Jesus says to Philip...“follow me.”

Notice also, they were not on sacred ground with their sandals removed, they were not in some lofty sacred temple, nor were they seated in a large luxurious, climate-controlled church building. They were in that place that St. John Chrysostom says that the people of Galilee “were

somehow of a more boorish and dull disposition than others.”¹ They were in a place where one has to wonder, can anything good come from this place?

Now what I find remarkable in this Gospel lesson today is *HOW* Philip follows Jesus. In this Gospel lesson we do NOT hear that Philip tags along behind Jesus...Philip shows us today that following Jesus involves telling others...inviting others to follow along. Listen again:

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." (John 1:43-45)

I wonder then when I consider this passage...Jesus coming to Philip and Nathanael, two ordinary men like any of us in here, and they encounter Jesus in the last place they assumed they would ever find anything good and they are invited to follow...I wonder then, how did we get to an exclusive understanding about our faith, about following Jesus or that only certain people can follow...only those who are just like us and live like us and think like us? How then is following Jesus such an exclusive mission that isolates us from all that “BAD” stuff out there?

I guess we got to this exclusive understanding because we view and interpret scripture as our own personal road map, our instructions for becoming GOOD. We seem to view scripture as our way to separate ourselves from all that out there because we are GOOD and they are not. Our faith in God and the good it invites us into ought not separate us, it ought to engage us with others, get us involved with others to live and be the Good News that is given to us all. James Sanders, an American scholar who was considered a great interpreter of the Hebrew Scriptures as well as one of the Dead Sea Scrolls editors said that one of his guiding interpretive principles was, “Scripture always and everywhere speaks primarily about God – and only secondarily, and then derivatively does it speak about us.”² This comment rings in my heart because I dislike the understanding that the Bible is OUR instruction manual, rather I see it as a manual that reveals God in our broken sinful lives.

The Bible does NOT instruct or guide my way to be good, rather it tells how GOD makes us all good. And from the very beginning one can see that GOD creates everything in the natural world AND THEN GOD creates us. And in this process GOD says it is good...the natural world nor any of us can claim we are GOOD...because GOD has already SAID ITS GOOD! We are created in the image of God...and that is good according to God *and* not according to what we establish for ourselves. We are not good nor do we accomplish that on our terms, God has that all covered very well.

But we all know this! Sadly though, we are still confronted by the question, “How can *I* be good?” and “How can *I* do something good?” And at the very heart of these questions lies our original sin...I, I, I, me, me, me, what can I do, what must I do, how can I...?

¹ Joel C. Elowsky, Editor, Thomas C. Oden, General Editor. *Ancient Christian Commentary of Scripture, New Testament Iva*, John 1-10, Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 2007. John 1:43-51, *Philip and Nathanael Follow Jesus*, The Best Disciples Chosen From The Worst Place, Chrysostom, page 83.

² Willimon, William H., *Pulpit Resource*. Inver Grove Heights: Logos Productions, Volume 40, No. 1, Year B, January, February, March 2012. January 15, 2012, 2nd Sunday after the Epiphany, “You...the Light of Christ” page 13.

Instead of turning our focus on ourselves; the more appropriate question ought to be, “What is the will of God?” When we only look at the good *I* can do or the good *I* can be we already made our decision and we have taken the ultimate good out of the equation and that is God...the one who makes us good. Our focus and our reality is that I can be good rather than focusing on the will of God revealed in the world through Jesus Christ. Our concern ought NOT be on the good that I can do rather our concern ought to be revealing and making known all the good God establishes for all in Jesus Christ. The question of good becomes the question of participating in God’s reality revealed in Jesus Christ...here and now in the world we are in and within all that surrounds us.³

I go back to one of my favorite acronyms, WWJD...NOT What Would Jesus Do? rather, What Would John Do, meaning John the Baptist, what would John the Baptist do, he would NOT ask what must I do, how can I be good, or how can I do something good, he would point us to Jesus and say:

“Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is He of whom I said, 'After me comes a Man who is preferred before me, for He was before me.' (John 1:29-30)

And we will hear John later in this very Gospel repeat this sentiment and his understanding of good:

He (meaning Jesus) must increase, but I must decrease.’ (John 3:30)

Today’s Gospel follows close on the heels of one of the most majestic passages about God and God’s Incarnation in Jesus:

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. (John 1:1-5)

And that light shines brightly in that very place where nothing good can possibly come from, and in that light is the very presence of all that is good, Jesus Christ, just as Gospel says:

¹⁴And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

¹⁶From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. (John 1:16)

The goodness of our faith does not separate us from our environments and our surroundings it gathers us in God and is God. And the good we do and become is following that goodness of Jesus Christ by giving it to all.

And what better example do we have than ordinary sinful people coming from the very places where one can only wonder, can anything good come from this place and gathering in the very presence of God that is placed into our very hands in this Holy Meal. Yes, in this place we hear,

³ *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Volume 6, Ethics*. General Editor, Wayne Whitson Floyd Jr., Translated by Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Scott. English Edition Edited by Clifford J. Green. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009. Christ, Reality, and Good. Christ, Church, and World. Pages 47-51.

this is my body, this is my blood given for you. Given to us is the very light and life...the goodness of God making us good here in this place.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen