

***Known
John 1:43-51
17 January 2021
sermon by Rev. Jessica McCrae***

Last week we talked about God's presence throughout all creation. We talked about presence and commitment and what it means to us to know that God is present with us always. Forever. That God always was and always will be, no matter what we humans do to each other, to our communities, to our planet, to ourselves. Come what may God is constant.

Today we take it one step further with a story about the calling of Nathaniel. We consider what it means to be known. We consider what it means for this ever present God to fully know us, and what it means for us to fully know God. First let's consider being known by God.

The calling of Nathaniel is by far my favourite of the call stories. Everyone else, in all the other call stories is so obedient, dropping their nets and following. Even Philip, who later is known as being the disciple who proclaims, full of doubt, the absolute impossibility of feeding the 5,000, jumps when Jesus says follow. Nathaniel though, Nathaniel has a bit of an edge about him. Almost like he is fed up

with yet another person coming forward claiming to be the Messiah. He's seen it all. When he first hears about Jesus, when his friend and new follower of Jesus finds him to tell him the good news he seems to roll his eyes and laugh, "Nazareth? You've got to be kidding." Or as other translations put it, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" But give credit where credit is due, despite his misgivings, he goes to meet Jesus. Maybe out of hope, maybe to prove a point about the folks from Nazareth, either way he goes to meet Jesus.

And what transpires tells us a lot about what it means to be known by God. When Jesus sees Nathanael walking toward him he shouts out, "There's a real Israelite, not a false bone in his body." Nathanael, looking around says, "Do you know me from somewhere? Have we met before?" How do you know my character?

Jesus then answers him "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." While it is possible that Philip actually found Nathanael under the fig tree when he told him he should come and meet Jesus, and while it is possible that Jesus was just standing there watching him, given Nathanael's reaction it seems unlikely. More likely Nathanael had been under the fig tree awhile ago, a few days perhaps, before Philip came to him, likely in some form of

meditation or prayer, focused on a specific concern, something private and very personal, something between him and God.

Because when Jesus says this to him he is so taken aback, shocked that anyone could have possibly known this. No details need to be given, Nathanael knows immediately to what Jesus is referring and immediately proclaims him the Son of God and the King of Israel. This is the one we've been waiting for.

What I love so much about Nathanael's call is that he seems so real, so authentic. He can be judgemental, he takes issue with people, he has frustrations, and he is a skeptic. He struggles. Like many of us. He doesn't always give people the benefit of the doubt. He has his opinions, warranted or not, about certain people, he doesn't always understand or attempt to understand those who are not like him. In that one knee jerk comment about Nazareth we get a glimpse into Nathanael's humanity. But we also learn that there is a lot more to him. We know that God sees beyond the attitude, the arrogance, we know that God sees potential, sees grace, knows what is truly in this man's heart. Scrape away all the distaste and scorn and derision that has built up, for whatever reason, around his heart, and Nathanael is part of God's good creation. And called by God.

Even with all of the anxieties and heavy concerns he was holding in his heart under the fig tree that day, he is part of God's good creation.

This is pretty encouraging for us today, I think. When we look around at our broken world, when we find ourselves judging others by their decisions during this pandemic, judging others for their political leanings, when we are living with such division and surrounded by so much brokenness. When we are carrying so much anxiety and so many frustrations ourselves. Let's face it, for some of us, it is hard to have a lot of hope in humanity when we witness the violence and fascism that unfolded at the US Capitol, and when we hear threats of even more violence to come. It is hard to have hope that humanity will ever be united, that we will ever be healed and made whole. But then we get this call story of Nathaniel's. And we are reminded that even with our flaws, with our imperfections, our meanness, our hurts, our sin, our humanity, God knows us, and calls us. We are part of God's good creation. Capable of change, capable of living into wholeness, capable of opening ourselves to God's transforming grace.

We are capable of healing.

Today we are reminded that Jesus meets us exactly where we are. When I say that I mean he meets us as imperfect people embroiled in the mud and muck of the realities of our lives as we are; it is that *us* that Jesus wants to meet. The real us. The us who feel fear over the violence at the US Capitol, the us who are disgusted by the racism and misogyny that has been allowed and encouraged the last several years. The us getting so frustrated when our neighbours break the rules of lockdown. The us who wonders how turning the other cheek will ever be possible again, or if it even should be. We want to be like Christ, but these days it is awfully hard. And the thing is, reflecting on this call story of Nathaniel's it is clear never expected that level of enlightenment and love and perfection from anyone. He wants us to grow into fuller relationship, into forgiveness and love, of course, but did he ever expect us to come to the table perfected? No. Not for a minute.

That is a difficult thing to grapple with because we have been taught that we need to be Christ-like, that Jesus is the fullest expression of humanity, being one with God, and that we should strive to attain that. And it isn't that this thought is incorrect exactly, but it has been corrupted. Our journey through life and faith is a

journey *toward* wholeness and fulfillment of our full and good humanity, the fullest expression of us. This is true. But no where are we told that being human is not good enough.

Think about it, if God only saw potential in the perfect and the strong and the unquestioningly faithful, why were you created? Why were any of us created? It seems to me, if this was the case, it would have been easier for God to leave well enough alone and not go to all the trouble of bringing any of us into being at all; because God saw it all while hovering over the face of creation, all the potential and all the sin all the weakness and all the mess.

It seems to me that what God really wants from us is not perfection, but full relationship between God and God's creation – relationship between God and us just as we are. And when we say yes to this relationship we are promised that we will grow, we will learn, we will love a little more. We will never be perfect, but we will be whole.

This is the invitation is offered to Nathanael. Jesus tells him that he will experience things greater than Jesus knowing his heart, understanding the burdens he carries. Nathanael will see heaven open and angels of God ascending on the Son of Man. He will

become whole. He will know incredible love and as a result be able to share more love. A bit esoteric, for sure, but it points back to another story in the old testament – Jacob's ladder. Remember that story? Jacob, was not really an upstanding sort of person, was full of flaws – he is the one who lied to his father and stole his brother's birthright. He had his issues. But God loved him in spite of all that. God saw potential in him and poured grace upon him and gave him a vision of heaven opening up, and angels travelling on a ladder between heaven and earth. He experienced a thin place, and knew God.

Jesus is our thin place. That is what Nathanael was being told. By entering into relationship with Jesus, just as you are, you are encountering God, you are stepping into a thin place where grace and love and challenge and invitation will all be poured upon you. You will be you in this relationship, but invited to grow into a fuller, wiser, more connected with God version of you than you might be otherwise.

If Jacob can do it, if Nathanael can do it, there is no reason we can't do it too. The invitation is there, we can know God and be known by God, fully. It just depends if you want to accept it or not. We have a great place from which to start, a great place from which

to begin or continue our journey – exactly where we are at this moment. And where are we at this moment? We are loved by God And exactly where God intended. The question is, “Where will you go from here?”

Amen.