

“Known”

A sermon by
Rev. Katie Crowe

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Our new testament lesson for today is a text for the season of epiphany that is upon us- epiphany being an appropriate name for the scriptural journey that unfolds as people have ‘a-ha’ moments about who Jesus is as he reveals himself. On the heels of Jesus’ baptism John tells the story of the calling of the first disciples. The day prior to our text, heralded by John the Baptist, Jesus had invited Andrew and his brother Peter to ‘come and see’ what he was all about, and now he calls two others. Hear the Word of God.

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. 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.” Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” Nathanael asked him, “Where did you get to know me?” Jesus answered, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.” Nathanael replied, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” Jesus answered, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.” And he said to him, “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” Here ends our reading. This is the Word of the Lord: Thanks be to God.

“I’m sorry, have we met?” This is basically what Nathanael asks Jesus. If you’ve ever used this phrase it was probably in a social setting after someone you didn’t know had been overly familiar with you. Its a question usually followed by some unavoidably awkward exchange. Prior to this text we see a series of introductions take place, introductions that ultimately led people to follow Jesus, responding to his invitation to ‘come and see’. Here Nathaniel is preparing to be introduced to Jesus by Philip when Jesus initiates a conversation with Nathaniel that is just a little too familiar to be coming from a total stranger. I’m sorry, have we met?

Had I been tapped on the shoulder by my friend to meet the one about whom the prophets foretold- en route I would probably have run through my list of questions for him in my mind. Nathanael is obviously bringing along a healthy dose of his own skepticism and even prejudice in his remark- Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Or, perhaps I would have put some thought into the highlights of my own dossier to share that would make me a compelling candidate for a colleague in ministry or at least a useful person for this foretold one to know. But whatever Nathanael had envisioned for that first conversation with Jesus in his mind, when he shows up, rather than enjoying the more comfortable and powerful position of anonymity he is confronted with recognition. “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” In an act of self-revelation Jesus discloses that he is not just some guy from the sticks of Nazareth, he is first person omniscient- he is all-seeing, all-knowing. While Jesus to Nathanael is a total stranger, Nathaniel to Jesus is known. “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.”

We tend to think about the persons of the Trinity- Father, Son and Holy Spirit- in terms of their functionality- who does what- but the gospel writer John is far more interested in their relationality- how they interact. And here we see Jesus in total synthesis with the omniscient, omnipresent God. This carpenter’s son from Nazareth suddenly reveals himself to be all-seeing and knows Nathanael in a way that is simply is not possible apart from God. And in response, completely disarmed, Nathanael utters this panoply of assertions about Jesus- making his own elated confession of faith- “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”

We learn so much about Jesus in these few little verses. For one, we get a glimpse into what it looks like for ‘fully God and fully man’ to hit the ground practically speaking. But what I find so incredible about this text is not that Jesus sees and knows Nathanael, but that Jesus sees and knows Nathanael and calls him anyway. Before Nathanael has even laid eyes on Jesus or uttered a single statement of faith or come to believe, he has already been sought out, seen for who he truly is and Jesus still stands waiting to call him his disciple when he arrives. We don’t know anything about Nathanael prior to this account and he doesn’t appear anywhere else in the gospels apart from mention of him as being among those disciples who saw Jesus on the seashore after the resurrection, when he invited them to join him for a breakfast of baked fish on the sand. No, we don’t know anything about Nathanael. We can assume he was an ordinary person just like you and me and perhaps that’s all we really need to know about him to know something about Jesus through him. Before a statement of faith was uttered, before they had even met, Nathanael was known to Jesus, and Jesus called him anyway.

“O LORD, you have searched me and known me.” We hear the Psalmist say and find our hearts comforted by the prospect of an all-knowing, all-present God and surely there is good reason for comfort. But if we’re honest with ourselves there is something absolutely terrifying about this too. “You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely” ...really? God sees it all. Those dark spaces in your heart, the worst places your thoughts can go. The things you don’t want anyone to know that you think about yourself or others. All the stuff within that you try to hide and pretend isn’t there because it doesn’t belong in polite society and certainly not in your life- God knows it all. Jesus knows it all and calls Nathanael anyway. Jesus knows it all and calls you anyway because there is something about the divine life of the Trinity that yearns for

your participation. There is something about Jesus that yearns for your participation in him. There is something about Jesus that yearns for your participation in God's work in the world and will use everything that you bring as a means through which redemption will be carried out.

We can hear this and think that it is all good and well but there is this doubting piece of us that feels like we know the truth about ourselves even better than God, isn't there? There is this piece of us that cannot get past the question, what in the world would God want with a sinner like me? Think of all the emotional energy that is invested in fortifying ourselves against being fully known by others. In the meritocracy that is our society we cannot imagine that we would be chosen for anything, let alone someone that could be useful to Jesus Christ or the building up of the kingdom were our deepest, darkest places fully known. So we bury what we perceive to be faults and weaknesses. We cover up our vulnerabilities and mistakes, lower the curtains of our hearts and put on a brave face for the world, hoping to isolate those things we wish to hide in a way that actually gives them more power.

Author Robert Mulholland offers a light commentary on this aspect of our human condition when reflecting on his own experience with it. He says "I was a mud pie with a thin layer of Christian frosting trying to pass myself off as an angel food cake, but the mud kept seeping through." (*Deeper Journey*, 24). Dietrich Bonhoeffer also talks about this tendency of our nature in his work, *Life Together* (*Life Together*, 110). He speaks of our sin, which we tend to define only as moral sin, but if we expand our definition of sin to include anything that separates us from God, ourselves and one another, if we think of it as the brokenness of the human condition in all of its manifestations- manifestations both within and out of our control, Bonhoeffer's take on it becomes all the more poignant. He says, "Sin wants to be alone with people. It takes them away from the community. The more lonely people become, the more destructive the power of sin over them. The more deeply they become entangled in it, the more unholy is their loneliness. Sin wants to remain unknown. It shuns the light. In the darkness of what is left unsaid sin poisons the whole being of a person." Our fear and resistance to being fully known threatens chaos within, and yet it is being known by God and others, Bonhoeffer argues, that causes what he calls a 'breakthrough to community.' It is the liberation that comes when everything is out in the open-everything is exposed- known by others and God and it is the knowing, he says, that sets us free. When what is hidden is known by this community than it becomes shared by them too, and the fear that was growing and enslaving us within dissipates in the gentle but powerful embrace of God's grace.

What in the world would God want with a sinner like me? The first time I asked myself that question I was sitting under a tree in Bristol, Tennessee at church camp. I was thirteen years old. Two years earlier our family had moved from my home town to a new state and I was the new kid at school and different from everyone else which made me an easy target for a group of tough girls everyone was afraid of. For the year that we lived there I was bullied terribly by them and went home every day physically and emotionally bruised and humiliated, isolated because everyone was afraid to be my friend. By the time we moved again I had shriveled up inside-angry and ashamed, I hated myself and distrusted everyone else, sure that if anyone really knew what was going on beneath the surface I would be rejected. So when at thirteen I went outside with the mass of campers after hearing about how God wanted to be my friend and being told to go and just be in silence for a while, I sat under that tree and wondered what in the world would

God want with a sinner like me? And that's when it happened. Suddenly, this heart that had been a cold stone felt like it was being cracked open and filled with light. A light that filled the rest of me and overflowed through my eyes in deep, heavy sobs that came- weeping not because of the pain and fear I was feeling inside, but because the pain and fear were inexplicably replaced with the feeling of complete acceptance, total affirmation and indescribable joy as what had been hidden deep within was exposed to the light of God's grace and redeemed. Not knowing what was happening I ran to my minister to try to explain, trembling and laughing and weeping. And he laid his hands on my shoulders and looked me in the eye and said "Katie, that is the love of God that you feel. God is going to do wonderful things with your life and I can't wait to see it." What does God want with a sinner like you? Everything. Absolutely everything. God gave affirmation and acceptance and joy in one particular way to that young girl under the tree who felt like she could be of no use to the Lord because of what was within. But these are God's gifts to everyone by grace and they are God's gift to you. There is nothing within you that God does not know and redeem. God loves you and is calling you to God's service complete with everything you bring. There is no where to hide with Jesus, and you don't have to. In his book, *The Strength to Love*, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., whose life and legacy we honor tomorrow wrote, "Man, for Jesus, is not mere flotsam and jetsam in the river of life, but he is a child of God. Is it not unreasonable to assume that God, whose creative activity is expressed in an awareness of a sparrow's fall and the number of hairs on a man's head, excludes from his encompassing love the life of man itself? The confidence that God is mindful of the individual is of tremendous value in dealing with the disease of fear, for it gives us a sense of worth, of belonging, and of at-homeness in the universe...The words of a motto which a generation ago were commonly found on the wall in the homes of devout persons need to be etched on our hearts: Fear knocked at the door. Faith answered. There was no one there."

O LORD, you have searched me and known me, the Psalmist says- comforting, terrifying words that are also filled with great hope. Comforting because there is nowhere we can go that is beyond the scope of God's love. Terrifying because Christ sees it all, and filled with hope because God calls us anyway, seeing not our depravity but our possibility, not what we are but what we can be in relationship with him- disciples who walk with Jesus as the body of Jesus in the world, disempowering fear through faith and bearing witness to God's love through our wounds. Bonhoeffer writes that "Every human idealized image that is brought into the Christian community is a hindrance to genuine community and must be broken up so that genuine community can survive." As Christian people we have been called out of anonymity and isolation from God into profound intimacy with him. This is not just the story of our salvation, it is the blueprint for our life together today, a blueprint that calls us to risk authenticity with ourselves, God and one another in community with one another if we are to be the body of Christ and participate in the building up of a kingdom that God truly wants to see.

Before a statement of faith was uttered, before they had even met, Nathanael was known to Jesus, and Jesus called him anyway. It wasn't Nathanael's faith in Jesus that initiated his discipleship, but Jesus' faith in him. We talk a lot about having faith in God but could it also be that God also has faith in us? Faith that we as God's beloved children are capable of carrying out the kingdom work and bearing God's grace in the world as sacraments, ordinary, broken vessels that we are. Take this possibility of God's faith in you seriously and there really is no where to hide even if you wanted too. Because when all the obstacles and excuses for why you

are not good enough to be of any use to the Lord are removed, all that is left is the call to serve that you, by your birth, by your baptism were created to answer with your entire life.

“I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.” Jesus says to Nathanael and so he says to us. ‘I saw you in your office, in your home, saw you on your way to church. I saw you on your cell phone in the carpool line, I saw you in that meeting, saw you walking down the halls of your school and I know you. Know you very well. Know what you’ve said and what you wanted to say. What you’ve done and shouldn’t have done. What you don’t want anyone to know and you know, with all that in mind, I could use a man like you, a woman like you, a young person like you, a child like you to speak a word of hope to my people. To come and see for yourself who I am and to be a part of my ongoing mission to redeem the world beginning in the cramped, dark corners of the human heart and extending to the ends of the earth.’ It is incredible, isn’t it? That we are known completely and God still loves us, has faith in us, yearns for our participation in the building up of his kingdom and in Jesus Christ fills us to overflowing with complete acceptance, total affirmation and invites us into the indescribable joy of our salvation. God is going to do great things with your life. I can’t wait to see it.