

## “Skeptics Welcome”

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January 25, 2015 Ordinary 2B (Postponed because of ice storm on January 18)

1 Samuel 3:1-10

John 1:43-51

In the story that Pete read from the gospel of John today, Jesus was collecting disciples before he began to travel through Galilee with his message of grace and truth. The day before, he had met Simon Peter and Andrew. And in today’s story Jesus found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.”

Now Philip is not one of the better known disciples. He was most known for bringing people to Jesus. And the first thing he did after Jesus found *him*, was to go find Nathaniel. He told Nathaniel that they had found the one they were looking for, the one whom Moses and the prophets had written about; it was Jesus, the son of Joseph from Nazareth. I love Nathaniel’s response. He asked, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

Now Nathaniel is not a well-known disciple either. In fact, he’s not even mentioned in the other three gospels. And this is the only story where he says anything at all. But we do know he was from Cana in Galilee (21:2). That was probably about ten miles from Nazareth, which may explain his response to Philip. Could there be a little hometown rivalry going on there? It’s like someone from Leonia asking, “Can anything good come out of Ridgefield?” We tend to be skeptical about someone important coming from an ordinary town near by.

I wonder if Philip went to find Nathaniel *because* he knew he would be skeptical. We can’t really know the answer to that question. But if you have any doubt whether or not you should follow someone, and you want a second opinion, you don’t want to ask someone who believes everything and would go anywhere without thinking. You might want to ask someone who knows the town or the people and tends to be skeptical, someone who might think critically about it. If a skeptic sees something there, there might really *be* something there.

So Philip went to get Nathaniel. When Nathaniel asked, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip didn’t argue with him. He simply said, “Come and see.” And Nathaniel went, because he was a skeptic with an open mind.

Now some people think there’s no room for skeptics in the Christian faith. You either believe it, or you don’t. They think that if you are confused or have doubts or ambiguous feelings, you can’t be a real Christian. But if the disciples are any model for us, they were sometimes skeptical and confused. They misinterpreted what Jesus said, and asked questions that showed they didn’t understand. And Thomas demanded to see a sign (John 20:24-25). Yet they all followed him and helped bring his message to the world. It’s not necessary to have full theological knowledge or faith to follow Jesus or call yourself a Christian.

When I was growing up my father was a skeptic who rarely went to church. He never argued against the faith, but he made it clear he didn't believe in God or Jesus. When it came time for my older sister to be confirmed, she argued that she shouldn't have to join the church because she didn't want to be a hypocrite like her father, who was a member, but didn't believe or participate. And she was right. If you don't believe and you have *no interest* in believing or being part of a community of faith, then you should probably not be a member of a church.

But sometimes things change, as they did for my father. He and my mother joined a small group in the church, which met in different homes once or twice a month, to study, talk about what was going on in their lives, and to pray for each other. This had a big impact on my father, as he got to know other people and see their struggles, and their faith. He began to see the effect of prayer and faith in their lives and in his own.

My father decided he wanted to believe. He joined the church's monthly healing service and prayed for others. He became an elder. He was even fired from his job because the boss wanted him to do something he considered dishonest. Rather than follow the boss's will, he did what he believed God would want him to do, and he ended up unemployed for it. Eventually there was a happy ending to this story. A year or two later the boss was fired and my father was hired back at a higher salary. After my father retired he joined the ambulance corps, became a volunteer chaplain in the hospital and was always helping our neighbors.

But a few months before he died, my father told me that he didn't believe in God any more. He had been struggling with cancer for ten years, and I guess he may have felt disappointed that God hadn't healed him. But he also said that even though he didn't believe, he still believed in believing. By that I think he meant that even if you can't believe 100%, believing in God makes a difference. It certainly changed his life for the better. He was much more in touch with his own feelings, and tuned in and connected to other people. It gave him courage to throw himself into life, to take risks, and do the right thing. He was a better father and grandfather, a better neighbor, a better person all around. Despite all that, as far as I know, he died a skeptic. But he was a skeptic with an open mind. And I believe that if people see Jesus face to face when they die, my Dad would have the same reaction to Jesus as Phillip and Nathaniel did.

I was planning to preach this sermon last week, but we had to cancel church because of the ice storm. But last week people celebrated the life of Dr. Martin Luther King. In many people's eyes, Martin Luther King has become larger than life. And we think that for good reason, because King did speak and act with the power of God. But we may also forget that King was a human being who was not always sure of what course to take, and who may have struggled with doubts. If you read the writings of the great saints, you see that many of them experienced long periods when they felt God's absence, or wrestled with their faith. What's important is not how sure or confident we are, or how many theological questions we can settle in our minds, but that we keep asking the questions and are willing to put ourselves out there and act on what we know.

Nathaniel was not moved or convinced by theological statements or arguments. What impressed Nathaniel was that Jesus noticed him when he sat under a tree. The story goes that when Jesus saw Nathaniel coming, he said, "Here's truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit." Nathaniel asked him (how do you know me?) "Where did you get to know me?" He was still skeptical at that point. But when Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree, before Philip called you," that did it for Nathaniel. Jesus had noticed him and saw who he was and what he was doing, and he said to Jesus, "You are the Son of God!"

Most people want to be noticed. I'm sure the people who were rescued from the fire in Edgewater last week are grateful that the fire fighters noticed them and helped them. They searched until they found and rescued every last person who was in the building at the time, whether they were old or young, black, white or brown, gay or straight, a saint or a sinner, it didn't matter. The families who lived in the Avalon lost everything. But their loss has not gone unnoticed. So many people, really strangers have surrounded them with gifts of clothing and food and other supplies, showering them with love and concern. It doesn't take away the deep sense of loss, but it makes a huge difference to know that people out there care and want to stand with you.

I think that's partly what made the difference for my father. No one could argue him into believing, although God knows I tried, fervently, as a teenage Jesus-freak. What made the difference for him was being part of a caring group, that grew to know each other and pray together. To be noticed and understood, that's what opened my father up to the possibility of the spirit.

When I was a teenager I was sure of my faith, really *too* sure. But before I went to seminary I went through a period of serious doubt. I'm not even sure how I ended up in seminary, except that maybe God was calling me. But by the time I got there, I realized I wasn't going to be able to settle all my doubts. Maybe ever. But I could live the questions and act in faith.

I knew something was drawing me to this path, and if I gave myself over to it, I would end up in the right place. So I kept asking the question, "Who is Jesus and what does he have to do with me?" I stayed in dialogue with God through prayer, trying to be open to that dimension that goes deeper than our minds and what we can see around us. And I tried to live the faith, to learn to love and care for others better, to work for what is right and good, and follow in the steps of Jesus.

Sometimes we make a confession of faith and then grow into it. I think that's what Nathaniel did. It probably took him years to really understand who Jesus was, if he ever did in this life.

There are many of you here today who have told me you're not sure you believe. Yet you keep coming. Something is happening here that is important to you, and it's important for you and for us that you be here, that you bring your questions and doubts,

that we can seek together and grow together. The truth of God is not shaken by our questions. If we have open minds and are willing to follow, to put into practice what we do know of Jesus, we will end up in the right place.

Today we are ordaining and installing elders and deacons to lead our church. Our elders and deacons are called to set an example as they help us shine the light of Christ in the world. But they are human beings who have their own questions and doubts like the rest of us. If God only called people of perfect faith to serve, there would be no church. Luckily we're not called to advertise Christianity or persuade other people of the truth. We're simply called to be honest in our own journey of faith and keep an open mind. And we invite others to come and see for themselves.

May we support each other and pray for each other, that together we may see the light of Christ, and share it with the world. Amen.