

Cat Goodrich
First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL
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Where Everyone Knows Your Name...
John 1:43-51

The gospel of John begins not with stories of a babe lying in the manger, but with the Word: in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. Then, John tells us of a voice crying out in the wilderness -- John the Baptist, testifying to Jesus as the son of God. Jesus calls his first two disciples, Simon Peter and Andrew, and then John tells us of the next two, Philip and Nathaniel, whose story we will hear this morning. And it is from this first chapter of John's gospel that we get the words we say almost every Sunday: the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth...

On Boston Common, there is a little subterranean bar with a faded yellow awning that tourists flock to. You know the one I'm talking about. I don't know what they're hoping to find. Maybe they're looking for an aging Ted Danzen, some guy named Norm, or a piece of nostalgia – maybe just they just want a pint of Sam Adams and a place where everybody knows their name. Because there's something about that, isn't there? Being a regular, being known. It feels good to be at home in a place.

A mile or two down Beacon Street from Cheers is another little underground bar called the Dugout – I think because it's around the corner from Fenway Park. With cracked vinyl booths, self-serve popcorn, and a steady stream of students, the Dugout is the definition of a dive bar. About ten years ago, a friend of mine set out to make the Dugout a place where everyone knew her name – in the best way possible. By that, I mean the Dugout was where she started something she called Pub Church. A regular weekly worship gathering that happened to be in a bar, Pub Church became a congregation of a motley crew of misfits who were unlikely to ever set foot in a church otherwise. Each week, they would share communion, sing, and debate deep theological questions. They used their offering to support causes important to them. Pub Church was a place where everyone knew your name, even if it was your first time there. A place where you could be vulnerable and open about who you really were. A place where you were known.

We all want to be known, don't we?

Look at Jesus and Nathaniel: Jesus knows Nathaniel before the two of them ever speak – and it's enough to convince Nathaniel that Jesus is the son of God.

It is remarkable to me that Nathaniel doesn't see Christ do anything. No one is healed, no bread is broken, no water turned to wine. Nathaniel only meets him in the road and realizes that Jesus knows him. And that's enough.

What is it about knowing someone, and being known that changes us? It's what philosopher Martin Buber calls the I/Thou relationship. Bear with me. Buber believes we only exist in relationship- either with others – which he calls the I/Thou- or with inanimate objects – the I/It. When we are in relationship with another, the I/thou, we become more complete. You make me more fully myself, and I make you more fully you. There is something that we share that makes us more human when we are together.

It reminds me of something I've shared with you before, the Zulu greeting "Sawubona" – which means, "I see you." the response is "Ngikhona," which means, "I am here." I'm truly here *because* you see me. It changes us to be seen, to be in relationship.

And there are so many people who society tries *not* to see, aren't there? Avert your gaze and keep on walking. Whatever you do, just don't make eye contact. I can't help but wonder if maybe Nathaniel hadn't been seen in a long while. Maybe he'd been worn down or disappointed, depressed or lonely. Maybe he just kept a low profile, hoping no one would notice him. We can't know why, but whatever it was that happened to Nathaniel made him cynical. When Philip invites him to come see Jesus, Nathaniel says, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Nazareth was a little town, 200-400 people lived there. It didn't figure in any of the messianic predictions made by Old Testament prophets. It was not a thriving city like Jerusalem or Rome, it was a backwoods place. Some might say it was... well, you know. So Nathaniel skeptically says, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" It's like saying, can anyone good come out of Haiti? Can anything good come from the Ivory Coast and Ghana, Somalia and the Sudan? How about from El Salvador? Can anyone good from a place like East Lake or Center Point or West End? Can anyone worthwhile come from *Birmingham*? What good can come from a place like that?

Philip says. "Come and see."

Come and see.

Philip invites Nathaniel to experience what Christ is like, so he can judge for himself if his doubts are well-founded. Philip invites him, confident that meeting Jesus will change everything for Nathaniel. Throughout the gospels, people met by Jesus change forever. Zaccheus, Nicodemus, the woman at the well. They want to run and tell the world what

happened to them. He must have had a magnetic personality, an unstoppable charisma. But it's not just that. Being in relationship changes all of us. Because when we come into relationship with someone, especially someone we've seen as "other," it's a lot harder to keep them as an "it." The de-humanized becomes human. They become a someone who reflects the holy image back to us, someone with hopes and fears and dreams – someone who makes us remember our common humanity! A no-good nobody from Nazareth becomes Jesus, the Son of God, the King of Israel.

I first met the Dansou family in the Atlanta airport. They had just arrived from a half a world away, from a refugee camp in Ghana. They were each clutching these white plastic drawstring bags with blue writing on them, given to them by the resettlement agency, holding on like their lives depended on it, dazed and exhausted and excited at the same time. There was mom, Selena, dad, Koffi, and three boys – Divine, Bismark, and Landry. A team of folks from my church in Atlanta had worked to assemble furniture and cookware and clothing and food to prepare an apartment for them to live in while they adjusted to life in the States. I went with them to their new home and helped show them around, explaining how their stove and refrigerator worked and how to open and heat a can of food. When I told them I was a Presbyterian pastor, Selena got very excited – she said, I am Presbyterian! I am Presbyterian, too! God has brought us together! When I was pregnant with Maddie, Selena was one of the first people I told, because she, too, was pregnant, with her daughter Kayla.

This was a family that fled violence in their homeland of Togo 18 years before. The three boys grew up in a massive refugee camp. Although she had trained as a seamstress, Selena did housekeeping in a motel because it was the work she could find. Even though he'd worked as a driver back in Ghana, Koffi commuted to work long hours at a chicken processing plant for little pay because it was the work he could find. On the surface, we had very little in common. But. To know them is to know that refugees are human, too. To know them is to know that whether you are black or white, African or North American, you deserve to be treated with respect. You deserve a safe place to live, a chance to go to school, or work that is meaningful to provide for your family. And if you're sitting there wondering why it is still necessary to affirm the humanity of refugees and others who have different culture or skin color or life experience or nationality than I do, as if that were still in question on this MLK weekend in Birmingham, Alabama in 2018, well, me, too. But apparently, it is. So I'm saying it.

The story of Philip and Nathaniel is a tale of discipleship and evangelism – when I've preached it before I've focused on Philip's invitation to "come and see." But today I think we have a lot to learn from Nathaniel – the scornful skeptic transformed by an encounter with Jesus. I think the call for us this day, this MLK weekend in Birmingham,

is to *go and look*. Go and look like Nathaniel did – overcome our skepticism, our cynicism, our doubt, our willful blindness and go – and do more than look. Go, and be in relationship with people who seem different than we are. Go to the margins, to the dehumanized, to a place like Nazareth and be transformed by the Christ who meets us there.

Many of the folks that became part of the pub church congregation – were people who for whatever reason had sworn never to be part of a traditional church. But because they had the courage to go and look – the experience of church changed them, changed their understanding of what it meant to follow Christ. They gained a community of welcome and hospitality and love. They gained a place where everybody knew their name.

Jesus promised Philip and Nathaniel that they would see greater things than in their first encounter. And they did: they saw loaves and fishes multiplied, sight restored, diseases healed, the unclean included, the broken made whole, tables turned, sins forgiven, death defeated, new life given to all – to you, and to me, to each one of us who is brave enough to go and look and be in relationship with the one who says, “come and see...”

In our lives of faith, our work of discipleship, when we have the courage to go and look, I wonder what we will see? When we are drawn into relationship with those whom we find, I wonder how we will be changed? Let’s go find out, shall we?