

Sermon for Sunday – January 15, 2023
John 1:35-51

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the wonderings of our minds reveal your wisdom in our time, God of life and light. Amen

There was once a village that had fallen on very hard times. The villagers had once been very happy and their community had been famous for its hospitality, and friendliness, and the warmth with which it welcomed strangers.

But something had gone wrong in the village. People had begun to bicker with one another. Quarrels broke out for no apparent reason. A rivalry sprang up where once there had been friendship and trust. The chief of the village was very sad about this. He knew that the people would never be happy like this, but he could do nothing to restore the harmony and peace. Strangers no longer wanted to visit the village. The people stopped caring for it. The village was falling into ruin.

It happened that one day a stranger came by. And very soon, he met the village chief. He recognized the sad expression in his eyes, and the two were soon engaged in a serious conversation.

The village chief told the stranger about his feelings of despair, and his fears that soon the village would disintegrate. The stranger told the village chief that he might know a way to help the lost village and restore it to real community again.

“Please tell me the secret,” the village chief begged the stranger. “The secret is very simple”, the stranger said, “The fact is one of the villagers is actually the Messiah.”

The village chief could hardly believe what he was hearing, yet the stranger had an air of authority about him that was irrefutable.

The stranger left, but the village chief couldn't resist telling his closest friend what the stranger had told him. Soon the rumor ran through the village like wildfire. “One of us is the Messiah?” Can you believe it, somewhere, hidden among our number, the Messiah is living?

Deep down the villagers were godly folk who wanted things to be right in their community. The thought that the Messiah might be living among them, incognito made them see things very differently. Could it be the Baker? They wondered. Or the postman? Or the farmer who breeds the chickens and sells the eggs? Perhaps it was old granny Riley? The speculation went on and on.

After the stranger's visit things were never the same again. They began to see each other differently. People began to treat each other with reverence. They lived like people who had a common purpose and who were seeking something very precious together. Before long visitors began to come to the village, just to be part of the happy, holy atmosphere that prevailed there. As for the stranger he never came back he didn't need to.

Our scripture lesson today, is a lesson about seeing.

About a skeptic named Nathaniel journeys from doubt to faith. Nathaniel experiences an epiphany, discovering for himself that Jesus of Nazareth is in fact the son of God, the light that has come into the world. He sees who God is.

But the story at its core is not only about what Nathaniel sees, it's also about what Jesus sees. It's a story about Jesus' way of looking and seeing and about what becomes possible when we dare to experience that gaze. In this story, what makes transformation possible, is not what Nathaniel sees in Jesus, but what Jesus sees in Nathaniel.

The encounter begins with Jesus going to Galilee, finding Phillip and inviting him to "follow." Phillip accepts the call and immediately runs off to find his friend Nathaniel and he finds him sitting under a fig tree. Phillip explains "we have found him, about whom Moses in the law and the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth", but the Nathaniel isn't impressed. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" he asks skeptically. Instead of arguing Phillip, simply tells his doubtful friend, to come and see.

When Nathaniel does so, he receives the surprise of his life. As soon as Jesus lays eyes on him, he sees right into Nathaniel's core, and names what he sees, "here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit."///

Seeing is always selective. We have choices when it comes to what we see, what we prioritize, what we name, and what we call out in each other. The person we present to the world is layered and messy and it takes both love and patience to sift through those layers and find what lies at the centre of who we are. But there is great beauty in that sifting. Something happens to us when we are deeply seen, known, named, and accepted.

Jesus has a choice when it comes to seeing Nathaniel. I wonder what would have happened if instead of calling out Nathaniel's, purity of heart, Jesus said, here is a cynic who is stunted by doubt, or here is a man who is governed by prejudice, or here is a man who is careless in his speech, or here is a man who sits around passive and noncommittal, waiting for life to happen to him.

Any one of those things might be true of Nathaniel. But Jesus looks past them all to see honesty and a sincerity, a purity of thought and intention, that makes up the true core of Nathaniel's character. Maybe the other qualities are there as well, but would have Nathaniel's heart melt in wonder and joy if Jesus saw and named those other qualities first? Or would Nathaniel withdraw in shame? Jesus names the quality he wants to bless and cultivate in this would be follower, the quality that makes Nathaniel an image bearer of God.

What would happen if we routinely saw as Jesus sees? If beneath the anger, we saw a passion for justice? If beneath the shyness, we saw a hunger for connection? If beneath the bossiness, we saw a great capacity for leadership? If beneath the loudmouthed banter, we saw a prophetic truth telling? If beneath the quiet, we saw a gift for reflection? If beneath the recklessness, we saw courage?

Is not each one of us more than the worst thing we've ever done. Each of us, benefits from a second look and a third and a fourth. To offer that second look, that deeper, kinder, and more penetrating look, is grace. It is the gracious vision of Jesus, and it is the vision we are called to practice, in a world that too often leads with judgment and condemnation. Is there anything that feels lonelier than the experience of being unseen and dismissed? Is there anything more lifegiving than being seen for who we really are, deep down beneath our fragile defences?

The invitation to come and see is an invitation to leave our comfortable vantage points and dare to believe that, maybe, we have erred in our original certainties about each other, God, and the world. To come and see is to approach all of life with a grace filled curiosity, to believe that we are holy mysteries to each other, worthy of further exploration. To come and see is to enter into the joy of being deeply seen and deeply known, and to have the very best that lies hidden within us called out and called forth.

I wonder how, in later years, Nathaniel would tell his friends about his first meeting with Jesus. I wonder how they would have reacted. "He saw me, he really saw me. And then I knew for sure who he was."

Whether anyone else understands or not, it's because Jesus sees who Nathaniel is that Nathaniel is able to see who Jesus is. "Rabbi, you are the son of God." In other words, it is when we have been seen in a profoundly personal and compassionate way then we find ourselves able to see others. It is when we have been loved right down to the core of who we are that we find the capacity to love other people as God loves us.

Our challenge, our mission, our response to the Jesus who sees us is: To see likewise.

To see others, to see the world, to see God's creation – to really see.

To see as Jesus sees is to transform our village, our world, our very lives.

Amen

(an old folk tale from One Hundred Wisdom Stories from around the World edited by Margaret Silf and some thoughts from Debie Thomas)

John 1:35-51 (NRSV)

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, ³⁶and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” ³⁷The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. ³⁸When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, “What are you looking for?” They said to him, “Rabbi” (which translated means Teacher), “where are you staying?” ³⁹He said to them, “Come and see.” They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon. ⁴⁰One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. ⁴¹He first found his brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which is translated Anointed). ⁴²He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, “You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas”

⁴³The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” ⁴⁴Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵Philip 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.” ⁴⁶Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” ⁴⁷When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” ⁴⁸Nathanael asked him, “Where did you get to know me?” Jesus answered, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.” ⁴⁹Nathanael replied, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” ⁵⁰Jesus answered, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.” ⁵¹And 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.”