

EPIPHANY TWO, YEAR B, JANUARY 14, 2024

I'm sure most of us have experienced that when we travel and someone finds out we are from New Jersey, what is the first thing they ask? What exit? Right? Take it a little further and for, better or worse, people make a lot of assumptions about New Jersey and certain cities or areas. You mention Newark and today's gospel phrase can anything good come out of Newark is on the minds of many people. Yes, a lot of great people have come from Newark. For instance, Philip Roth, Stephen Crane, Paul Simon, Allen Ginsberg, and Supreme Court Justice William Brennan were all born in Newark.

How about, can anything good come out of the Jersey Shore?" Well, Count Basie, Norman Mailer, Jack Nicholson, Bruce Springsteen and Bon Jovi. "Can anything good come out of Hoboken?" Sinatra!

By the way next time someone asks you what exit say Exit 7, where you get off to go to Princeton University and brag that it has had 35 nobel recipients.

But let's be honest and admit that more often than not we are more like Nathaniel in today's gospel in dealing with people. How often have we expressed attitudes shaped more by popular culture and social media than by Christian charity. How often have you shaken your head about whole groups of people regarding their ethnicity, sexuality education, immigration status and exclaimed, "Can anything good come out of those people?"

Now just as Jesus could "see" Nathaniel for who is really is, Jesus is inviting us to see how he sees not just others but ourselves as well. Jesus 'sees' us with all of our faults yet sees a person to whom God is calling to do the right thing.

Most of us are old enough to remember the TV show "Laugh In". If you recall there was a popular sketch that the comedienne Lily Tomlin made famous when she played a telephone operator named Ernestine. Part of her well known monologue included the words, "One ringie-dingie, two ringie-dingies, three ringie-dingies," and then she would always ask the person on the other end of the line, "Have I reached the person to whom I am speaking?" Well, in essence, that is what these lessons are about today. Has God reached the one to whom God is speaking? These lessons focus on how God reaches out to all of us and asks are we listening to what God is asking of us. Or are we too caught up in determining if anything good can come out of those around us.

In the Old Testament lesson we heard about the little boy Samuel. His mother Hannah had prayed in the temple that if God would give her a child she would dedicate that child to God. God answered her prayer and gave her a son. When Samuel was still quite young she took him to the temple to assist Eli, the aging temple priest.

Little Samuel was fast asleep one night when he heard a voice calling him. He thought it was old blind Eli calling for help. But it wasn't. This happened three times and the fourth time he realized that this voice came from God. Samuel was still a little boy but God called him to start preparing him to carry out God's work and we know what a significant role he played in choosing the first two kings for Israel – Saul and David.

Then in the gospel reading Jesus called to Philip, "Come with me". Philip raced off and found Nathaniel and told him he had found the Messiah. But Nathaniel couldn't believe the Messiah could possibly come from Nazareth- nothing good ever came out of Nazareth. So Philip invited him to, "Come and see" and he did. Nathaniel listened to

Jesus and discovered Jesus saw him for who he is and that led him to follow this new way of life.

You see, our God is a calling God. Our God is always asking “Have I reached the person to whom I am speaking? Throughout all time, we find God calling people from all walks of life. Abraham who was wealthy and settled in his community was called to leave everything and go to a land that God would show him; the reluctant Moses, who had a speech impediment, was called to lead the people of Israel to freedom; the shepherd boy David, not old enough yet to shave, was called to be king; the cheat Matthew was called to be a disciple; the Christian hater, Saul of Tarsus, was called to be a missionary to the Gentiles; the brilliant musician and theologian, Albert Schweitzer, was called to serve lepers in Africa.

And we wonder why God chose some of the people God did, in fact, not some, but almost everyone God called would not have been our first choice. When God called young Mary to be the mother of Jesus, it seemed so wrong. She was too young, too poor, unmarried, too ordinary, but God called her anyway.

When Jesus called Peter and James and John they were simple fishermen with no special qualifications. At times they were extremely dense and slow to catch on, but he called them anyway.

Tomorrow we celebrate Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday. God also called Martin to be a proponent of non violent social activism. As he fought for justice, the goal was not to defeat his opponents, not to bring down the oppressors, but to bring about reconciliation. King prayed for his enemies because he believed in and popularized the term “Beloved Community.”

The church is certainly called to be a Beloved Community, where everyone comes together to encourage each other, to support each other to promote God’s inclusive kingdom where peace and welcome and reconciliation are freely offered. But King extended that idea to all of humanity. Our concern is not simply to be for ourselves and those close to us. King understood that we are indeed “called together.”

He wrote an essay called “The World House.” In it he wrote “A widely separated family inherits a house in which they have to live together.” This is the great new problem of [humankind]. We have inherited a large house, a great ‘world house’ in which we have to live together—black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Moslem and Hindu—a family unduly separated in ideas, culture and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace. . . All inhabitants of the globe are now neighbors.”

Our everyday life demonstrates how interconnected we are. We are held together by the internet, by global trade, by our dependence on other nations for resources and goods. Our banks are intertwined, our corporations are international. If one nation goes through a recession, many nations across the globe feel the impact.

Dr. King’s Beloved Community is a global vision, in which all people share in the wealth and goodness of the earth. Through our scientific and technological genius we have made of this world a neighborhood and yet we have not had the ethical commitment to make of it a brother and sisterhood. But somehow, and in some way, we have got to do this. In the Beloved Community, poverty, hunger and homelessness will not be tolerated because human decency will not allow it. Racism, bigotry and prejudice will be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood. In the Beloved

Community love and trust will triumph over fear and hatred. Peace with justice will prevail. This is God's call to us.

What is evident in all these examples is that the people whom God calls to do God's work are ordinary people like you and me –people with weaknesses and handicaps, people with their fair share of marriage and family problems, people who have a lot or don't have much going for them from a human point of view. God is not asking can anything good come out of us because God knows the good is already there.

What God does do is to challenge and confront us to stop thinking we aren't enough. When God calls ordinary people like us to be disciples, God is inviting us to do acts of love and kindness, to be good parents and grandparents, to be active and faithful members not only inside the church but outside these church walls, to be respectful of all people, to be social activists for the gospel, to be generous beyond our imaginings or whatever it might be that God calls us to do. But it is up to us to listen for that one ringie dingie, two ringie dingie, three ringie dingie and respond when God asks, have I reached the one to whom I am speaking. Amen.