

## EPIPHANY 2, YEAR B, JANUARY 17, 2021

Do you remember the popular phrase “What would Jesus do” and all the t shirts and bracelets and other paraphernalia echoing that sentiment? It personified the idea to think about what Jesus would do in any given situation. Since the season of Epiphany is all about light and Christ revealing himself to us in new and different ways, I wonder if we could change that phrase to What would Jesus see if he were here today?

If we look at the gospel lesson this morning we have mostly looked at the call of Nathaniel and how he reacted when Philip tells him about Jesus. Nathaniel scoffed at Philip’s discovery. He said, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” What he means is something like this: “This man is from the wrong part of the country, from the wrong social class, he has the wrong accent, he has no real education or training. Seriously, why should I listen to him?” Or to put it in today’s vernacular – “yeah right, whatever.

Nathaniel’s reaction is not much different from a lot of people today only their reaction is to the church. Recent surveys say 50% of Christians do not attend church and have no desire too. Why? They think that religious organizations are too concerned with money and power, too focused on rules and too involved in politics that suppress the rights of others. They believe a Christianity based in nationalism and patriotism has nothing to do with Christ’s teachings.

I think this is why so many people today question Christianity, “Can anything good come out of the church?” According to this group present-day Christians are judgmental, hypocritical, old-fashioned, out of touch with reality, insensitive to others, and boring. And the church itself is antiquated, behind the times, speaks the wrong language, irrational, judgmental and full of hate, etc. etc.” Is this what Jesus would see today?

Even Pope Francis has said one of the problems in the Christian church today is how people make Christianity an ideology that is rigid, moralistic, and ethical without kindness. This happens when there is a lack of Christian witness and prayer and “the knowledge of Jesus is transformed into an ideological moralistic knowledge which closes the door and chases people away. Pope Francis said Christians have the key in their hand but take it away without opening the door. Mahatma Ghandi even said, If it weren’t for Christians, I’d be a Christian.

You know after Jesus’ death and resurrection, the community that emerged from those who had been with Jesus gained a reputation which is the exact opposite of how the church is viewed today.

Christians broke down social barriers. They disregarded religious taboos that judged people as ritually clean or unclean, worthy or unworthy, respectable or disrespected. They subverted normal social hierarchies of wealth, ethnicity, religion, and gender in favor of a radical egalitarianism before God and with each other: Paul wrote, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”.

In a word, the first believers were generous. They demonstrated authentic transparency, not moral superiority or ulterior motives. Like Jesus, they exuded compassion rather than condemnation. They lived out of gratitude not fear, and had a reputation for empathy rather than fault-finding. The first followers of Jesus were people of self-sacrifice, not self-interest. They insisted that God was like a tender parent, not a

vindictive tyrant, and encouraged every person without exception to believe what the psalmist said: "This I know, that God is for me".

A generation after the first believers, the theologian Justin Martyr summarized the appeal of Christian community: "Those who once took most pleasure in accumulating wealth and property now share with everyone in need; we who hated and killed one another and would not associate with men of different tribes because of their different customs now, since the coming of Christ, live closely with them and pray for our enemies." Similarly, Tertullian wrote, "Our care for the neglected and our active love have become our distinctive sign before the enemy. . . See, they say, how they love one another and how ready they are to die for each other."

I wish those traits could be what Tertullian called "our distinctive mark" instead of what most people today think of when they hear the word "Christian." And it can be done. But 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. Who 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 core of who we each are. Something healing, something holy, happens to us when we are deeply seen, known, named, and accepted.

Jesus had a choice when it came to seeing Nathanael. He might have seen a cynic, a doubter, or a man governed by prejudice who sits around passing judgment on others. Any of these things might have been true but Jesus looked past all of them to see his honesty and intention to see for himself who Jesus was. Jesus chose to see that quality in Nathanael and to cultivate it.

What would happen if we routinely saw as Jesus sees? I believe the first place we start is by asking can people see Christ in us? Because seeing Jesus is the most compelling argument that exists for Christianity. And how do people see Christ in us? It's by starting with having respect for one another. It means not jumping to conclusions or having ulterior motives and hidden agendas; it means treating everyone fairly and justly; it means being responsible and not instigating discord out of fear; it means acknowledging boundaries and authority. The truth is being disrespectful is born out of fear. So by practicing deep respect we can get at the heart of who God calls us to be and see as Jesus sees. Because when you start treating others with respect than all the other attributes of empathy, compassion, generosity and hope begin to take form. Hope is born out of that respect for one another and recognizes that we are inextricably bound together.

The invitation to "come and see" is an invitation to leave our comfortable vantage points, and dare to believe that just maybe, we have been limited and wrong in our original certainties about each other, about God, and about the world. To "come and see" is to approach all of life with a grace-filled curiosity, to believe that we are holy and 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.

Tomorrow we celebrate The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. birthday, a man who dared to see as Jesus sees. A man who dared to call forth the best in all people — both black and white, both victim and oppressor. A man who looked deeply into the racial hatred of his day, and yet envisioned a world where justice would roll down like mighty waters.

In one of his essays, King wrote, “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, Muslim 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. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opposers into friends....It is this love which will bring about miracles in the hearts of [people].”

This is the call of Epiphany. To see. To call forth. To dream. And to bless.  
What would Jesus see? Go and see likewise. Amen.