

“Can Anything Good Come out of There?”

John 1: 43-51

Human beings sometimes have the oddest attitude when it comes to the topic of enemies. It almost seems that we want to have enemies. That’s silly, why want to have something bad, isn’t life difficult enough already?

When I was a kid, the enemies were Communists. The word Communist (anyway, the way it was used) was pretty much the same as “no good, rotten, stinking scum.” It wasn’t until I was in seventh grade that I learned that it actually meant a different form of government, badly run and corrupted, enemies of our country.

I remember once working with a woman my age who had been terrified of Communists, when she was a child. She realized as an adult that that had been pretty silly, because she had grown up on a farm in the middle of Kansas, where it was very unlikely that a Communist would come and get her! But somehow, we have to have bad guys.

And, sometimes we want to place a judgment, a bad judgment, on where people have come from, where people have lived. If it’s not that, then it’s how they look or how they speak.

Maybe that’s so we can feel superior or something. It’s really a pretty snotty attitude, and not the way Jesus would have us be.

How surprising and awful that Jesus himself encountered this attitude from Nathanael, a man who became one of his 12 special disciples, of as the kid book said, “a dude who did.”

Jesus, God’s own Son, was met with sarcasm and skepticism by Nathanael.

Philip, a brand-new disciple of Jesus, had come to recruit Nathanael. “We’ve found the Messiah! It’s Jesus, Joseph’s son, from Nazareth!”

“Yeah, right, can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

But even with this grumpy, doubtful attitude Nathanael gave it a shot. He went along with Philip to “come and see.”

Here is Dennis Smith’s version of this story:

Nobody expected it of Nathanael. Philip, yes, and his friends, the impetuous Andrew and Simon, of course. But not Nathanael, the model citizen, the pillar of the community. Yet now here he was, leaving behind everything he had ever worked for. And for what?

It all started with the two brothers, Simon and Andrew. They had always been rather wild in their youth. Sure, they had settled down for awhile to work as fishermen. And they were pretty good at it, too. But the next thing you know, they were off on some wild-goose chase.

Lately they had been hanging around down by the river with an unkempt bunch of hippie types and their guru, a strange-looking fellow called John the Baptist. It seems that John was offering some kind of alternative view of the world, and the young idealistic types were flocking to him.

Simon and Andrew were always doing something like that—always looking for a better way, always wanting to reform the world, feed the hungry, save the whales, stuff like that.

Then this new fellow came along, named Jesus, from Nazareth of all places, and before you knew it they had latched on to him. What they saw in him is hard to comprehend. The man from Nazareth was something of a failure, a wandering teacher who barely got by on contributions from others who felt sorry for him. Apparently he had never been able to hold a steady job. But that did not matter to his groupies. They hung on every word he said.

So you could see where it was all heading. Before too long Simon and Andrew would also be wandering the streets looking for handouts—that is unless they came to their senses and returned to their jobs as fishermen.

And then there was Phillip. He was more of a stay-at-home type who tended to his duties. But he had always secretly admired the two brothers. So it should have come as no surprise that he got caught up in their latest cause.

But Nathanael? How did he get involved in this? Nathanael was known for his hard-headed pragmatism. He would not put up with any foolishness. So when Philip came to him that day and said they had finally found the Messiah, you knew Nathanael had to see right through him. There was no way the Messiah could be an itinerant preacher from a backwater community like Nazareth.

Not that Nathanael did not believe in the Messiah. Far from it. Nathanael longed with all that was in him for the day when God's chosen one would come and bring justice to the world. Nathanael may have had a gruff exterior, but inside he had a soft heart. Others may have hardened themselves against the suffering around them, but Nathanael took notice. Others might overlook the beggars at the gate, the hungry in the street, the lepers, the blind, the poor—all the forgotten ones of society—but

Nathanael felt their pain. And his heart ached for them. That is why he used to dream of the coming of the Messiah.

But perhaps he had cared too deeply, because lately it had begun to wear on him. He had grown impatient with the lack of any real change in society. He had long ago lost the optimism of his youth. Now he was becoming a cynical old curmudgeon. He no longer believed that change was possible. He no longer expected the Messiah in his lifetime.

So when Philip made his remark about having found the Messiah, Nathanael just scoffed at him. All Nathanael had to do was look around him; it was clear that nothing had changed. And it did not take a great Bible scholar to figure out that Jesus was all wrong for the part. As Nathanael so eloquently put it, “Can anything good come from Nazareth?”

Now here is where the story gets a bit strange. After he actually met Jesus, Nathanael, that no-nonsense pillar of Pragmatism, did a totally uncharacteristic thing—he left behind his job and his financial security to join up with the man from Nazareth. It just didn’t make any sense. Jesus must have really pulled the wool over old Nathanael’s eyes to make him do such a foolish thing.

The thing is, Nathanael got it right the first time. Nothing good, leastwise the Messiah, for crying out loud, can come from Nazareth! That is just not how it is supposed to work.

So Nathanael remained a mystery to everyone. The last anyone heard, he still had not come to his senses. And when you would meet him on the road, and demand an explanation for his bizarre behavior, he would just look at you with a twinkle in his eye and say, “Sometimes you have to follow your dream.”
(by Dennis E. Smith, in The Storyteller’s Companion to the Bible, Volume 10, John)

Just think what Nathanael would have missed out on if he’d relied on his own opinion of Jesus’ hometown, Nazareth. Just some crummy little one-horse town—big deal. What a pity that would have been for Nathanael, and maybe even for us.

After all, if Nathanael had refused this opportunity we might not have this story in the Bible.

That brings me to something I really find disturbing in Nathanael’s initial response. It’s prejudice, as the word is literally meant, pre-judging someone, or something, or even somewhere before you know anything about that person, or

thing, or place. I guess that feeds into that human fault of wanting bad guys and enemies so much that we create them ourselves.

Prejudice is more than just a fault—it's a sin. It is wrong to judge someone ill based on race or skin-color or gender of country or town of origin. Wrong.

Yet it still happens. I'm sure that many of us in this room have been on the receiving end of prejudice, at least a tiny bit. I know I have. And it's bad; it's like hitting a brick wall. That person has his or her mind made up about you, against you, because you are of a different _____ fill in the blank, than he or she is. No matter what you say or do, that's it. Worse yet, much, much worse is when prejudice is built into society like racism, sexism, ageism, with masses of people against a group. Discrimination and violence and real evil come with that.

As it happens today in the United Methodist Church is called Human Relations Sunday. Today we make a special effort, mentally and financially, to promote good Christian understanding between people and to get rid of prejudice. Laws have been changed in our country for civil right and equal protection of the law—Good! We're still working on the attitudes and realities of how minority persons are treated.

Well, back to the story in the Bible, because there are some other neat parts to it. Jesus convinced Nathanael right away, that yes, he was the Messiah, the promised one from God to save the world.

Jesus did this by showing his divine power and knowledge of Nathanael before ever meeting him.

Well, Nathanael was impressed. He at once said, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"

He believed, boy did he believe! Gone were the sarcasm and prejudice.

And Jesus said, (to paraphrase): "You think that tree thing was impressive? You ain't seen nothing yet!"

And he was right. He went on "Greater things are coming. Before this is over you're going to see heaven open and God's angels coming down to the Son of Man and going up again." (from the Message version of the Bible)

Heaven's going to split open—just because Jesus came to this earth.

I think Heaven did split open—angels have come and helped us along, and then gone back home to Heaven. Heavenly blessings have fallen out upon us, and all people, over and over again.

That's true! We have all been blessed by Jesus Christ—this last week, and all our lives.

And we have Heaven itself to look forward to—all because Jesus came, even if it was from Nazareth, to preach and teach about God, and to give himself up for us. Don't knock Nazareth, or any person, or place, or thing without good cause. You might miss out on something very important that way.

Amen.

(by Rev. Sally J. DeMasters)