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The Rev. Aaron M. G. Zimmerman (01/14/2024, Second Sunday after the Epiphany)

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Let us pray. Almighty God, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

My sermon this morning on 1 Corinthians chapter 6 is entitled, fornication, ye or nay. I don't know who that was, but that was a bold choice. That is not what I will be preaching on today, but Kudos to Liz for reading that passage and one day I may preach on that, but that day is not today. I do want to talk about Tracy Flick. Live crowd this morning on this this Minnesota morning. Tracy Flick was played by Reese Witherspoon long before her morning show Fame. This was a movie in 1999, directed by Alexander Payne, and it's a movie about high school student body president election. And in the movie election, there are different people vying for this position. And Tracy Flick is the front runner. She's the overachiever, the straight A student, she's involved in all the extracurriculars. She's the one that really you would think would win this thing. And near the end of the movie, the night before the election, she prays in her room about the next day's events and she says, dear Lord Jesus, I do not often speak with you and ask for things, but now I really must insist that you help me win this election tomorrow, because I deserve it. And Paul Metzler doesn't, as you well know. I realized that it was your divine hand that disqualified Tammy. And now I'm asking that you go that one last mile and make sure to put me in office where I belong so that I may carry out your will on earth as it

is in heaven. I'm  
in. Tracy thinks that God works transactionally. I have been good and  
therefore I should be  
rewarded. God should give people what they deserve and I deserve a  
lot. Many people see  
God this way, although we may not pray as explicitly as Tracy does, we  
may not say that  
we believe a God who rewards the good and punishes the bad. We may say  
we believe in a God  
of grace who is forgiving and merciful yet. I mean, if I'm honest,  
there is still a Tracy  
flick inside of me. And the reason I know this is because anytime  
something bad happens  
to me, often my first response, emotional response, is one of  
indignation. I don't deserve this.  
I've been good. I do all the things that we're supposed to do and I'm  
doing my best to be  
a good citizen. How could this thing happen to me? And this is not  
just a mentality within  
the church. It's also mentality, I think, just out there in the world.  
When you talk to  
people who are not churchgoers, they may still talk about the idea of  
putting good energy  
out there into the world. And as I do that, as I put out that good  
energy, whatever that  
may be, the manifesting I'm doing, that the universe will then send  
back good things  
to me. And this transactional view of God slash the universe is  
something that seems to  
be pretty deeply held by a lot of us. But here's the problem. The  
problem is, if you were  
to look at our actual lives and start talking about what we really,  
truly deserve, we might  
find ourselves less able to pray like Tracy Flick, who might find  
ourselves less able to  
presume that we deserve all the good stuff. If we really get into the  
things, the reason  
I know this to be true other than from just being human, I talk to a  
lot of humans. And  
it turns out that many, many, many people have parts of their lives  
that don't show up on  
their resume. And may, in fact, if you're going to talk about what  
people deserve, it might  
lower their scores, shall we say. There's parts of their lives that  
they hide. Maybe it's  
a massive failure. Maybe it's simply a difficult period. Maybe it's  
just something that is  
embarrassing or indicates weakness and not strength, failure and not  
success. Parts of  
our lives that we hide. I was in college. I met a woman in our

freshman year. She lived in the dorm with me. And she was from a state that began with the letter I. And she sat it like she had walked off the set of Fargo. She's from a small rural town. And she was just full of don't you knows and weird vowels. I did not see her then again until our senior year. I was walking down the street and I ran into Jenny and we started having a conversation and the funniest thing had happened. She had completely misplaced her accent. And she now spoke sort of newscaster English. She was embarrassed. The fact that she was from Fargo or wherever. Fargo metaphorically speaking. She hid that part of her. My family. So my mom is Mexican. From San Luis, Puerto C, and grew up in different towns in Mexico. But we are a mixed race family. And so some of us look browner than others. And there's two kinds of white people. There's the pink ones and the olive ones. You know which one you are. And the thing about the olive white people is that sometimes the pink white people ask the olive white people where you're really from. And so this person to my family sometimes she is persons more but olive olive one and has gotten asked where you're really from. And this person will say Spain. My mother's grandfather on her dad's side was from Spain. So this isn't totally out there. But it's sort of a hiding the wider picture a little bit. Maybe because to say Mexican or something like that it doesn't have quite the same cachet. I know people from Waco that when they meet people from New York they say that they're from Austin. You know this kind of stuff happens all over the place. We hide these parts of ourselves. Just was reading a story about a woman who was a very successful head of a website called Dogist. It was sort of a social media and a website thing that tried to basically sell supplies for dogs. And she grew the following for this thing to five million people and it was a really successful enterprise. And the people that manage all the social media said you're really good at this influencing stuff. You should make yourself a brand and you should do it. But the thing about her is she would often talk about the time she was treated in an inpatient psychiatric ward for severe mental illness. And they said

you can have a great career as an influencer. You just can't talk about that part of yourself anymore. Many people have a part of their life they don't talk about. Whether it's the fact that they were at age 19 married for six months and nobody knows about it except their closest family. There are people who deal with a debilitating mental illness or chronic illness or chronic pain and they don't tell anyone about it. There are folks who maybe did their first year of college at Hollywood upstairs community college and then spent five years in the wilderness waiting tables and then they went to Baylor and that's all you know about them. But there's this whole other chapter that they don't talk about. You'd be amazed if you had this experience and you know somebody for 10, 15, 20 years and then you find out there's a piece of their life that you had no idea. We hide these things so often because we think that God is transactional. We think the universe is transactional and if people were to find out we would no longer get the good stuff. Now epiphany as you can see that's where we are, these signs and nouns where we are in the church year. Epiphany means revelation or revealing and this is the season in the church year where we talk about what is revealed about God. Now that Jesus has arrived Christmas. So what is the revealing? What do we find out? And as we reveal more about who God is that actually helps us to be who we actually are. And I want to talk about that and I want to say something about Kirk Franklin but first just a little bit on John's gospel and Lenny Kravitt. So John begins chapter one here talking about the beginning of Jesus' ministry and if you know the song by Lenny it called are you going to go my way? It puts in the voice of the singer this Messianic person. I am the chosen, I am the one are you going to go my way? And that's what Jesus is doing at this phase in his ministry. I'm here, I'm starting an are you with me? So he's calling people into his ministry. He does it here with Philip. He says Philip are you going to go my way? Follow me and Philip follows him. And then Philip goes to his friend Nathaniel and says we found the chosen and the one are you going to go his way? Come follow, come find out. And Nathaniel says well who is

this guy? And he says well Jesus of Nazareth. And in his famous line Nathaniel says can anything good come out of Nazareth? Because you know we hear the term Jesus of Nazareth and it's got centuries of religious gravitas that has been added to a Jesus of Nazareth. But really it's like saying Josh from Cleveland. It's Nazareth is not a fancy place. It's not a prestigious place. It's not the kind of place. People move to to increase their social standing by having a better zip code. It's like saying we found the Messiah from Brownsville. There's nothing to it. It's sort of like it demotes you as opposed to advancing you. And this is not an accident. When God comes into the world could have picked any hometown but picks this one. The Nazareth principle means that God intentionally and purposefully works in overlooked and unexpected places. In theological terms people describe this as the theology of the cross. That God not doesn't work in big glorious shining rainbows in the sky but God works on Golgotha. God works on Calvary. God works on a cross. God works in the places you don't want to look. The things you don't want to talk about. The difficult, the hard places. The paralysis, the anxiety, the insomnia. God works in those places. This is the theology of the cross. God doesn't work on the stuff that's on your resume. He works on your secret resume. You know the stuff that you don't put on there. This means for you as we talk about the epiphany, the revealing of who God is. If this is who God actually is, if this is where God works, this is good news. Because whatever that place in your life that you're hiding, that you don't want people to know about, the failures, the weaknesses, the coming up short, all those things, it means that God lives there. In 2016, there was a song, a hip-hop song that was released called Ultra Light Beam. I don't want to talk about the person who wrote or produced that song. If you know who it is, applause for you and your knowledge of pop culture. But I want to talk about the end of that song where Kirk Franklin, who's an incredible gospel artist, has a prayer, the spoken word prayer at the end of that song. And Kirk Franklin says, Father, this prayer is for everyone that feels they're not good enough. This prayer is for everybody that feels they're too messed up. For everybody that feels

they've said, I'm sorry  
too many times. And then he says, you can never go too far that you  
can't come home again.  
What this means, the Nazareth Principle means that when you feel like  
you are too far afield,  
you've wandered and you've strayed and there are parts of yourself  
that you don't want anybody  
to see or ever know about, it means you can actually go to those  
places and God is there because  
that's where God is from. God is from Nazareth. God is from those  
places in your life that you never  
want to talk about. And what this means is that you can actually maybe  
integrate yourself.  
It means you can say who you actually are and where you're actually  
from. And this is what  
the gospel does. Now, I don't know if you're there yet, but I pray. I  
pray that we would, by God's  
grace, be the kind of people that dare to imagine the possibility that  
all of who we are is known and  
and that all is embraced by God in his unconditional grace and  
forgiveness. And that we might be people  
that instead of telling people who are from a suburb of the decapolis,  
we can say we're from Nazareth.  
Instead of telling people we're from central Texas, we can say we're  
from Waco. Instead of telling  
people that I'm between jobs, we can say I was actually fired. Instead  
of telling people, I  
can't make it to your party because I have other plans. We can say,  
you know what I'm going through  
really rough patch right now and I just can't be around people. We  
might actually be honest about  
who we are because God has already been honest about who we are. And  
he said, I see you, I know you,  
I forgive you, and I love you because he is from Nazareth. Amen.