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"You don't sound like you're from Nazareth" The Rev. Dr. Andrew Armond
(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 meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. O Lord, our strength and our redeemer, in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. In a song called the best imitation of myself, the 1990s phenom then folds of Raleigh, North Carolina, says, do you think I should take a class to lose my southern accent? Over the course of my several careers, I've had the good fortune to travel to a decent amount, to literary conferences, religious retreats, research trips to prestigious libraries, seminary residencies, teaching workshops, and many job interviews. Inevitably, the question is put to me over and over again, a friendly enough question where are you from? And invariably, when I answer Louisiana, I almost always get the same reply. You don't sound like you're from Louisiana. And while that's true to a certain extent, while I did, at some point, lose my southern accent, the accent called lowland south by linguists, the same dialect that extends from Tyler through North Louisiana where I grew up and then encompasses much of the states of Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and the Carolinas. Somehow, I lost my southern accent. Most of it. And even though I know that consciously people don't mean anything particularly discriminatory when they say you don't sound like you're from Louisiana, they probably are expecting and hoping that I sound like Ray the Cajun Firefly from Disney's 2009 film The Princess and the Frog. Y'all for Shreveport? There is also most likely some unconscious bias there as well. We tend

to associate the people who would be moving in the spaces that I described earlier. Conferences, workshops, interviews, libraries with wealth, status, and intellectual stimulation. And we don't expect people with strong rural accents to populate those spaces. And so on the one hand, we could focus the rest of our time here today simply on this fact that Nathaniel has a bias and that Jesus disarms him of that bias and that therefore the kingdom of God is not defined by our preconceived ideas about who belongs there, that there will be people there who we are not expecting. And that is true, and that is wonderful. But I want to take us in two slightly different directions. And I want to do so by focusing on two phrases from the Gospel of John today. And so the first phrase is this, Jesus decided to go to Galilee. So at the beginning, Jesus decided to go to Galilee. You know, Jesus had to go to Galilee, not Jesus found himself in Galilee, not Jesus ended up in Galilee by some magic or miraculous means. Jesus decided to go there. He wanted to be there. Jesus decided to go and call disciples and minister and to announce the kingdom of God in the midst of his own home region among people that had the same rural accent that he did, among people that were far from the places of power and influence among fishermen, day laborers, the types of people he had grown up around and from whom he had learned his trade. We still use one of Jesus's own expressions, salt of the earth, to describe people like this in fact. And one of the important things we mean by this phrase is these are people without pretense, without an agenda, people who are straight forward and honest and transparent, people who have nothing to prove, no poses, no snares, they're not trying to trap you, they say what they mean and they mean what they say. And so when Philip excitedly tells his friend Nathaniel about Jesus, he begins with the best thing he can imagine that this is the one, the one about whom Moses wrote in the law and the one of whom the prophets also wrote, the one foretold in the scriptures, everything that people of God had been hoping for and longing for centuries. And I imagine this exchange with Nathaniel, his face getting more and more excited as Philip is describing this person to him and then falling, contorting, twisting into disappointment as Philip gets to the end of the sentence. Jesus,

son of God, promised one,
from Nazareth. Oh, well, Nazareth. Yeah, no thanks. I know how people
from Nazareth talk. There's no way
that the one foretold in the holy scriptures, talks like that, looks
like that, smells like that,
is from that town. And so when Jesus sees Nathaniel and jokes with
him, I think that this is someone who
always tells the truth, hey, Nathaniel, you're a real straight
shooter, aren't you? You're a real
salt of the earth type. Nathaniel is understandably nervous. Did Jesus
see him say something rude
about his hometown? Did he read lips from miles away or did Jesus just
presume that Nathaniel from
his accent and mannerisms was someone who would make fun of people
from Nazareth? God decided
that Galilee would be a good place to be from. Jesus decided to go
there in order to be the living,
breathing, loving presence of God that is for all people. And so that
brings me to the second phrase
that Nathaniel utters, where did you get to know me? How do you know
anything about me? Jesus
have we met before? How do I know me? Notice that Nathaniel does not
say, how do I know you,
again, he says, how do you know me? In other words, how do you know me
so well? Jesus is able to create
this immediate connection, this strange and wonderful intimacy, this
shocking closeness before
Nathaniel really even has time to react. It is a beautiful fact of the
gospel of the coming of God
in the flesh of Jesus Christ, that we are known before we know. We are
loved before we love.
We are, as the Psalmist says, searched out and known, oppressed upon
behind and before.
We are loved totally, not just in each moment, each slice of time,
each year, or month,
or week, or day of our lives. We are loved immediately, wholly,
completely, from start to finish.
We are loved for the things we haven't even done yet. We are loved in
our birth and in our death,
our rising and our sleeping, our successes and our failures. When
Nathaniel is trying to figure
out how Jesus knows enough about him to tease him about being a salt
of the earth type,
Jesus says that he saw him under the fig tree before Philip even
called to him.
Some scholars think that the fig tree is a sign of Nathaniel's
studiousness, that he was a scholar,
a student of the law, that teachers of law often sat with their
students under fig trees in the shade.
I don't know if that's true or not, but I'm going to speculate for a

moment. If this is the case,
I like to think of Nathaniel as the student coming to Jesus. He's
eager to meet this person that he
knows from books, this person about whom he is studying, this person
foretold by the scriptures that he
thinks he knows so well. I like to think of Nathaniel sort of going
into that encounter a little
bit sort of puffed up with his knowledge, being humbled by this rural
accent, the simple ways and
the surprising grace of his teacher. The books he has read and studied
tell him that the Messiah is
a powerful king, but the books don't convert Nathaniel. The books
don't give Nathaniel this epiphany,
this moment of encounter where he is known fully and completely, a
moment where he is hemmed in
behind him before, a moment in which someone sees him for everything
he truly is and loves him.
Loves him not even despite his flaws in failings, but loves them too.
Loves with a fierceness that
calls him not away from his true self, but toward the truest version
of himself.

And so Nathaniel has given a great gift. His preconceptions are
shattered. He is known and
seen beyond anything he could have imagined in his life is changed. He
has met Jesus through
an encounter. He realizes the fullness of God's love and this
encounter in which he is fully
and completely known. And we too meet Jesus this way. We too meet
Jesus through encounter.
That means that we meet Jesus not as an abstraction, not as a person
in a book, not as a symbol,
not as an idea, but we meet Jesus as a real person. In word,
sacrament, in bread and wine,
but also we meet Jesus in many ways, many unexpected ways outside of
these walls.

In fact, Rowan William says that God is the encounter we can't
control.

We see this over and over again in the scriptures. It's a blessed
grace in fact that God comes to us
in unexpected ways. Samuel is being called by God, called out of the
familiarity of his
existence and surroundings into a deeper encounter with God, but he
can't understand what's
happening at first. Nathaniel is called out of his preconceived ideas
about God and God's Messiah
into a deeper encounter in which he is seen and known in ways he can't
understand at first.

We too are called into an encounter with Jesus and we may not
understand what's happening at first,
but we are called, we are loved, we are seen and we are known. And so

there's a blessed
simplicity to this story from John's gospel because there's a blessed
simplicity to God's grace.

There's a blessed simplicity about Jesus that compels Nathaniel to
follow him.

We often argue, to be believing that if we just had a little bit more
faith, if we just
worked a little harder, if we just studied a little bit more under the
fig tree, if we just knew
a few more things about God that we could please God, that we could
level up, that we could climb
the ladder to heaven. Maybe that's how Nathaniel felt until Jesus saw
him and knew him and loved him.

And Jesus simply and profoundly wants us to sit in the fact that we
are known and we are loved
and we are seen. Some of you know of this spiritual writer and priest,
Henry Nowan. He spent his life
dedicating his life to knowing God and to communicating great truths
and his writing and as a priest
and a writer and even a kind of celebrity in religious circles. He was
often tempted himself to do
more to be more rather than to rest in the simple fact of his
belovedness.

Yet eventually he realized that to live out his calling as a priest
and a Christian, the most
significant thing that he could do in imitation of Jesus and with
God's love as his guide was to
get to know people the way that Jesus got to know Nathaniel, to love
them and to see them the way
that God seized them as beloved, as chosen, as called. And so I want
to leave you with his words.

More and more he says the desire grows in me simply to walk around,
greet people, enter their homes, sit on their doorsteps, play ball
through a water and be known
as someone who wants to live with them. It is difficult not to have
plans, not to organize people
around a cause, not to feel that you were working for something, but I
wonder more and more if the
first thing shouldn't be to know people by name, to eat and drink with
them, to listen to their
stories and tell your own and to let them know with words, handshakes
and hugs that you do not
simply like them, but truly love them. We are loved and that enables
us to love the whole world. Amen.