

1 Samuel 3:1-10(11-20)

Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

John 1:43-51

When I was a little girl, I had a best friend who lived just across the street. She and I were inseparable. She was an only child and her name was Mary Lillian. We spent as much time in each other's houses as we possibly could. And every now and then we would have a spend-the-night party. When she stayed at my house on a Saturday night, she would go with my family to the Episcopal Church on Sunday morning. When I spent the night at her house, I would go to the Presbyterian Church with her family. It was at her church that I first heard the hymn "What a friend we have in Jesus!" It's in the Episcopal hymnal, but simply wasn't a hymn that my church ever used. I remember thinking that if Jesus was my best friend, like Mary Lillian, everything was going to be all right. You see, Mary Lillian and I knew each other very well. She knew everything about me and I knew everything about her...which actually isn't very much when you're 5 or 6 years old.

When all is said and done, knowing someone and being known by someone is one of the greatest and most fulfilling experiences a human being can ever have. It's at the heart of true intimacy, but it's also very scary! Knowing someone and being known by someone is a revelation of self and is at the heart of what we celebrate during this season of Epiphany...the basic, fundamental, all-encompassing desire to know another and to be known...in this case, by Jesus. We come to know who Jesus truly is during Epiphany and we are then drawn into experiences where Jesus can know us as well. As wonderful as that experience is, it can also be terrifying. It's a bit daunting to think that someone could know absolutely everything about us...all our thoughts, all our deeds, all our feelings and the nature of what's in our hearts...but Jesus certainly can and does. Some of the time, we aren't sure ourselves that we want to know that much about ourselves...let alone let anyone else know all of these things. What will Jesus think of us? What will we do if he rejects us? We often struggle with what we think of ourselves. It's amazing how much of ourselves we keep covered from ourselves with these psychological barriers we have known as defense mechanisms. They keep us from seeing things about ourselves that we can neither accept nor justify. They are the blind spots. We don't want to know that much about ourselves. So knowing that Jesus can know more about us than we know about ourselves can shake us up quite a bit and encourage us to flee. Do we really want Jesus to be that 'up close and personal'? It's this basic fear that lures us into keeping Jesus at arm's length. We can learn about him intellectually, but having a life-altering experience with him is something altogether different. Allowing ourselves to know Jesus and to be known by him is a transformative experience. We are never again

the same. We can't go back. We can't 'unknow' Jesus and we can no longer hide from him or our true selves either.

That's the sort of transformation we see in Nathaneal in our gospel lesson this morning when he encounters Jesus for the first time. Nathaneal doesn't strike us a happy-go-lucky fellow. He seems to be a bit on the negative side and somewhat skeptical. When Philip invites Nathaneal to come and see this man from Nazareth who Philip identifies is the one that Moses told us about...the one from God who is to come...Nathaneal's biting response is pretty jaded: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" But when Jesus identifies Nathaneal as 'truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit,' without ever having had a conversation with him, Nathaneal does an about face in a split second. He is transformed and suddenly knows that he is indeed speaking to a rabbi...the Son of God...the King of Israel. Suddenly he *knows* Jesus as he realizes that Jesus *knows* him. What an epiphany!! Epiphanies tend to transform people. If we have an Epiphany, we suddenly 'just know' exactly who we are dealing with. And things are never again the same. It's an experience that is not reserved for Biblical characters, either. These things happen to flesh and blood folks in our world...right here and right now.

This weekend is Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend. On Monday, we will celebrate a national holiday in his honor...remembering that in his day, he was one of the most hated public figures in America. But in retrospect, he was one of the most powerful and influential children of God our country has ever known. He facilitated transformation of people and systems that seemed permanently entrenched in our national life. In his book Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story, Dr. King describes a powerful epiphany in his own life. It was in the middle of the bus boycott in Montgomery when tensions were high and the atmosphere was heated and dangerous and he was receiving not only mountains of public criticism, but death threats as well. He describes his experience this way:

I was ready to give up. With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me, I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had all but gone, I decided to take my problem to God. With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory. "I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone. At that moment, I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced God before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: "Stand up for justice, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever." Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything.¹

What Dr. King shared with us is that confession precedes revelation. When he confessed to God his true feelings...his fears and his shortcomings and his doubts...God revealed Himself by responding as any friend would...by reassuring Dr. King of his steadfast presence with him. They would be walking together through whatever lay ahead. We can identify with the feelings of fear and doubt that Dr. King confessed that night alone at his kitchen table because in our country...in this week...and perhaps in the weeks ahead...we are feeling the same fears and doubts not only about our own safety, but about the very survival of our precious democracy in the face of so much internal hate and turmoil and violence. Dr. King was not a stranger to any of these forces. In real time, it's sometimes hard to tell the troublemakers from the peacemakers. But in retrospect, we can see that Dr. King was a faithful disciple of Christ...a peacemaker struggling for the dignity of every human being. His struggle unleashed the chaos of confusion and violence of those who did not want every human being to have dignity or power.

Jesus was busy calling and making disciples when he met Nathanael. Discipleship...as we all learn...is a willingness to walk with Jesus, not just the obedience to an abstract set of codes or traditions or even liturgies. It is about walking hand in hand with the living God and following him. It's a joyful relationship...learning about Jesus and walking with Jesus. It's about knowing him as a living being and allowing him to know us...warts and all. It's about confessing to him who we really are...all our misgivings our fears and our doubts...and in so doing we reveal not only ourselves to God, but to ourselves and to Christ. It's not enough to simply believe in Jesus. Discipleship consists of following him all the way to the cross, if necessary. In Nathanael, God honors the qualities of honesty, genuineness, integrity and open-mindedness. But God does not require perfection. God requires that we have the desire to know Christ and the willingness to allow ourselves to be known by him.

Each one of us faces challenges each and every day and our decisions reflect not only who we are, but who we strive to be. In the decisions we make we come to know who we are. And in our conversations with God we share not only our confessions, but also our revelations about ourselves. God doesn't ask that we be perfect. God doesn't require that we get it right all the time. God requires that we make ourselves known to Him and that we make ourselves open to recognizing our Lord Jesus when we see him. Jesus took Nathanael, a person who was humanly praiseworthy, and made him into something more...a disciple. May he do the same for us. And may we experience the joy of knowing and being known as we walk with Jesus. What a friend we have in Jesus!!

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.

¹ Martin Luther King Jr, *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*, 1st edition (Harper & Brothers, 1958), 124–125.

²Rippentrop, Jan Schnell, Homiletics Professor and Political Theologian, Lutheran School of Theology, Chicago, Ill., Commentary on John 1:43-51, January 14, 2008, *Working Preacher*