

When We Share Christ, God Grows Faith  
(John 1:43-51, Psalm 139:1-6;13-18)

When Philip started telling his friend Nathanael about Jesus of Nazareth, Nathanael cut him short. "Just stop right there," he said. "We all know that nothing good can come out of Nazareth!" Many people feel that way about the church. "Can any good thing come out of the church?" they ask, but their minds are almost made up. I am on the chaplaincy committee at Rio Grande. Every month the committee presents panel discussions on topics of ethics and faith. From the things that students have said during question and answer times after these panel discussions, it is clear that many students are totally turned off by church. They have either had bad experiences with church or have formed negative stereotypes of church from what they have seen and heard from friends or seen on TV. Once burned they are twice shy. God may be good. They may want spiritual experience, but they are skeptical about the church. "Can anything good come out of the church?" "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" What was Nathanael's problem? Had he been mugged in Nazareth? Or was it just a town saddled with a bad reputation. Can anything good come out of the slums? Can anything good come out of jail? Philip thought Jesus of Nazareth was someone Nathanael ought to meet. But Nathanael wasn't so sure. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Think back over your life, and I'll bet you notice that the things you remember most are either very positive moments or very negative ones. I can remember vividly the first time I saw the young woman who is now my wife. I can remember the first time I saw Lake Superior. I can remember the first time I ever caught a fish. I can remember, too, when I came to school without my glasses and the teacher made me go home to get them. I can remember when I burned my wrist on a burning charcoal briquette. I can remember my worst stomach cramps. One memory that is crystal clear is the day my father went stream fishing with me. Now Dad was not a stream fisherman. I had asked him to take me, because he was sure that there were trout in Upper Peninsula streams. "Sometimes they hide under roots of trees along the bank." It was near dusk when we walked downstream a few hundred feet from the bridge over the Little Garlic River, not far from my uncle's camp. There, on the bank, was this pine tree. It had rough bark, and the branches scratched me as I tried to get into position to put my line in the water. I leaned against it and put my rod around the side. I couldn't see any fish there. It seemed awful shallow. My pole got tangled in the tree branches. The mosquitoes had supper on my face. It got darker and darker. It is a wonderfully fond memory of my Father taking time to be with me and help me, but when it comes to catching fish, it was not a stellar moment. The experience was educational, however. It taught me that anyone who said you could catch fish out of streams didn't know what they were talking about.

A year or two later, I don't remember now how long it was, we were up at camp again, taking one of those long explorational car rides down dirt roads. We came to a place marked Blue Heaven Lodge on the map. The old hunting camp was long gone. The beautiful Big Garlic River flowed past and under a road

bridge. Somehow, in the trunk of the car contained my fishing rod, and some worms. I think Mother must have put them there. "Go throw your line into that stream," she said. When it came to stream fishing, I was once burned, twice shy. I had long ago learned what a barren experience stream fishing was. But she and Aunt Eleanor would not let it drop. Finally, just to get them off my back, I put a worm onto the hook. I plopped down on the nearest bank and threw the worm in. I could see four or five feet through the clear water to the bottom. There were no fish at all. Nothing would bite. Soon I would be vindicated, and then I would say, "I told you so!" The worm sank into the water. It moved downward for less than a second. A small trout darted out from under the log I was sitting on and hooked himself on my line. I couldn't believe it. Actually, I was the one who was hooked. My parents thought we were going to spend fifteen minutes at Blue Heaven Lodge. An hour or two later, when they said we needed to leave, it was still too soon. I had thought nothing good could come out of stream fishing, but many years later stream fishing still brightens many of my days.

Truth be told, fishing is fun, but it hardly ranks as a basic life need. My life would be complete, even if I had never seen a trout. Not everything is not so optional. Naomi Levi tells about a young man who came into her office to talk to her. His name was Jim. "'This is the first time,' said Jim '[that] I've been in a synagogue in over twenty-seven years.'" She said, "'I'm glad you've come. Why have you stayed away so long?' He fidgeted. His eyes welled up with tears (*To Begin Again* by Rabbi Naomi Levy, p. 15) and he told this story. 'My father died when I was a young boy. My mother didn't really know what to do with me, so she used to send me to the synagogue. The old men of the synagogue took pity on me. They adopted me, and the synagogue became like a second father to me. After my bar mitzvah the rabbi there was so taken by me that he asked me to read from the Torah in front of the whole congregation on Yom Kippur. . . . The night before Yom Kippur, I was so excited, I couldn't sleep. In the morning I jumped out of bed, got dressed in my bar mitzvah suit, the only suit I owned, and ran to the synagogue. When I got to the entrance, an usher was standing at the door, and he said to me, 'Where's your ticket?' I looked up at him and said proudly, 'I don't have a ticket. I'm reading from the Torah today.' But the usher said, 'I don't care what you think your reading, you're not getting in without a ticket.' I turned around, and ran home crying. I suppose that I've never stopped running. . . I thought to myself, 'If that's all religion cares about is who has a ticket and who doesn't then I don't want anything to do with it.'" Once burned, twice shy. The rabbi told Jim how glad she was that he had shared his hurt with her. She told him she hoped he would come back to synagogue more often to see that this religion was a caring one, and that this synagogue was filled mostly with good and kind people.

A number of years later that the same Rabbi was sitting in her office. A tall thin blonde woman named Helen came to see her. Although not born Jewish, she was married to a Jewish man, and they had two children. When they were first married her husband didn't seem to have much interest in his religion. But recently he had returned to his faith with intense joy. She was so deeply moved by her husband's devotion to his faith that she wanted to convert to Judaism. At

the years end, Helen embraced the Jewish faith together with her two children. Her husband sat beside her beaming. It was Jim, the same man whose faith had ran away crying so many years before. (*To Begin Again*, p. 27) He had been once burned and became twice shy, but now there was great joy in his life. For more than three decades that joy was missing. How could any good come from a place where he had been treated so poorly.

Nathanael's skepticism is reality for many in our world. Many are skeptical about the good news that is life and light to us. Some have been burned once and are now twice shy. They have been hurt by conflict in the church. They have had a falling out with another church member and been badly criticized. Harsh words were said. Unforgiveness holds sway in both hearts. Others have brought their brokenness for sympathy, but instead of finding healing, judgment was given. One woman who was getting a divorce came to her pastor. They had done everything to try to make it work. But it didn't. When she told him he said words to the effect that according to the Bible divorce was a sin, and she was doing the wrong thing. "Couldn't he just have said, 'I'm so very, very sorry. My heart goes out to you.'" Some have been in churches that teach that God rejects them for their sin, that cannot be loved or accepted unless they are perfect. They may even learn to reject others when they make mistakes and sin. Others have simply heard rumors about churches like this, until they have a hard time believing that faith is anything but bad news. Like Nathanael, they say, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" In their minds they think they know the answer.

Philip wants to bring something good into Nathanael's life. He wants to bring Jesus Christ. But Nathanael is not buying what Philip wants to sell. Now if you have dealt with salesmen or telemarketers you know that they always have some kind of song and dance to prove to you that your objections are baseless. Nathanael wasn't like that. He didn't have any argument. No ten reasons. No threat of buy today or the price will double. Not pressure that this is the last chance. All he said was, "Come and see."

Nathanael must have seen something, for when all was said and done he confessed faith, and followed Jesus. What was it he saw? What changed his mind. John tells us only this—Jesus greeted him and saying, "Before Philip called you, when you were underneath the fig tree, I saw you." That's all the gospel tells us about what happened, but could there be more to it than what shows on the surface? Could it be that Philip encountered in Jesus the love of God who knew all about him, but loved him anyway? Listen to the Psalmist. O Lord, you have searched me and know me. Before a word is on my lips, you already know it. You know when I lie down, you know when I get up in the morning. You fence me in behind and before, laying your hand upon me, keeping me from harm. There is nowhere I can go that you are not present. Not in heaven. Not in hell. Not even in my deepest despair. You are never away without leave, but always with me. You knew me when I was growing in my mother's womb. How intricately I have been put together. What wonderful work. Your thoughts are so vast that I cannot begin to imagine them all. I can no more

number them than I can count all the grains of sand on all the shores of every ocean. That kind of knowing is too wonderful to me.

Can anyone come into the presence of this kind of knowing and not go away filled with awe? Nathanael came. Nathanael saw. Nathanael's heart was changed.

I was sure that there were no fish to be found in those cold Upper Peninsula waters. How delightfully wrong I was. Jim was burned by a man who would not let him into the synagogue because he did not have a ticket. How could any good come out of an institution that thought faith was about who did and didn't have tickets? It couldn't! He was sure of that. It was more than three decades before he found the joy he knew there in the first place. Nathanael doubted any good could come from Nazareth, but then he came and saw. We have come, and we have seen. And we are changed. Not by tedious work that often needs doing. Nor by the hurts and disappointments that come when our hopes are not realized. Not changed by the hurt feelings and sharp words exchanged, for even in God's house, and even in God's work, humans are still humans, equipped with differences and prides and hearts worn on the sleeve. Perhaps we are changed when we see that God can work even in such troubled water, and even through people like ourselves who are far less than perfect. More than anything, though, I believe because we have come and seen in Jesus Christ a Loving God who does not ever throw us over, who loves us more than we love ourselves, who forgives, nourishes, challenges and saves. We come because we have been known by a God who knows more about us than we know about ourselves—and is our friend still. My commentary says that this story teaches that witness evokes faith. That's a fancy way of saying that when Christ is shared, when the real love of God as seen in Christ is shared, then God grows faith in people's hearts. It is true in my life. I believe it is true in all of the lives gathered here. We know that not all will catch that trout, or find the joy of living life in God's presence, or come to faith. Not even Jesus could or would keep some from going away. But there are many in our world who are disillusioned, angry, apathetic, burned once, for whom the joy of faith will not slip away. They will come. They will see and they will be glad that God surprised them with something far more lovely than they ever imagined. Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Come and see.