

January 14, 2024
Second Sunday After Epiphany

“Greater”

John 1:43-51

What happened under the fig tree? You can't help but ask that question when reading the first chapter of John. Just before our reading today we're told about Andrew and Peter becoming disciples. We today hear of Philip being called to discipleship by Christ Himself. Philip, then, proclaims his faith to Nathanael in saying *“We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.”*

Nathanael is less than enthusiastic. *“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”* But his skepticism seems to do a major 180 after Jesus addresses him as *“an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!”* and then simply states, *“Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.”*

Boom! Nathanael is completely convinced Jesus is the Messiah. *“Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”*

So what was going on under that fig tree that was such a big deal Christ's knowledge of it brought about such an immediate change of faith in Nathanael? We are never told. The folks who created the latest mini-series about Jesus, “The Chosen,” did a really cool take on it, but it was a complete fiction. Holy Scripture just leaves us wondering. But whatever it was, it left Nathanael with no doubt about Jesus.

Nathanael is convinced. Nathanael is a Jesus-follower now; a disciple, and one day an apostle. The funny thing is that even in this great statement of faith, Nathanael apparently is still coming up short in his understanding of who Jesus is. First off he still calls Jesus “Rabbi”, which seems a really small thing to call the incarnate true Son of the almighty Creator. I think by “Son of God” he probably means like David was a faithful son of God. By “King of Israel” he probably means over the earthly territory of the Promised Land.

But it's Jesus' response that makes me think Nathanael isn't comprehending the big picture, because Jesus goes a lot bigger: *“Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? You will see greater things than these. Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”*

Jesus paints a picture from the Old Testament when Jacob dreamed of that ladder to heaven with the Lord at the top and the angels ascending and descending. Jacob called that place the Gate to Heaven. But Jesus says the Son of Man is now at the bottom of that ladder. And that term Jesus uses of Himself quite a bit, Son of Man, has a whole lot of freight with it from the word of God by His prophet Daniel: *“I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.”* Jesus is bigger; this King of all power.

And after Jesus makes this claim to divine power, promising Nathanael will see this glory, we get nothing more of the episode, moving on to the wedding at Cana where Jesus will miraculously turn water to wine. So what do we do with this?

I think one thing to consider here is that right faith in Jesus can still miss the mark. We all can be like Nathanael. In our sin we were, of course, all like the skeptical Nathanael, resisting the Lordship of Jesus, unwilling to give up our authority over ourselves. But we all had the fig tree experience when we came to know that Jesus is Lord, the Christ who died and rose to forgive our sins. Maybe it was your baptism as a child and being raised in the faith. Maybe it was conversion as an adult. But you came to

believe, and at times you've probably seen the Lord working in your life. And yet, we still find ways to shortchange Jesus, count Him as less than all that He truly is.

We know Jesus as the Lord of love who forgives us all our sins. This is right faith and His truth of salvation brings us great joy. We rightly praise Him for His gifts of grace that save us from a just condemnation.

But while we call Him "Lord," I think a lot of times we lean more toward seeing Him as "rabbi" as in teacher. He teaches much about love, humility, forgiveness. But we're just not very good students, are we? We feel bad about that, but kind of accept it and go about our lives as if that's just the way it is because, well, Jesus is our Savior who forgives all that.

What's missing there? Is that considering Jesus the Son of Man whom "*was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him*"? Is that treating Jesus as the Lord of Lords in the true sense of that word "lord"? Or is that seeing Jesus as a lovey-dovey marshmallow kind of Lord who looks at our sins with a wink and a nod?

Do you see what I mean about right faith not going far enough in recognizing Christ? Right faith sees our sins as bad and wrong; an offense to God. Yet, we find ways to make our sins small, just one of those annoyances that comes with a fallen world, and in that we make the Holy Lord who gave everything to remove those sins something less than He is—a lord who tolerates that which is opposed to Him.

It is appealing to our sinful nature to make Jesus less, make Him more of a benevolent rabbi lord who teaches us His ways, but then our job is to live our own lives trying to remain within those ways while pursuing our own path, our own goals and desires. And when we step out of His ways in sin, He'll be there to clean it up so we can say "Thanks" and get back to what we were doing before.

That's not how this works. That's making Jesus smaller than He is and giving yourself authority you do not possess before Him. That's part of the point St. Paul is making to the Corinthians who are acting as if they have a right to call the shots over themselves because they have freedom from sin in Christ. "*Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.*"

You belong to the Lord as in being His possession, His servant, His slave. We don't like such slave language, but the alternative is to belong to Satan, so get over it—you are blessed in this beyond what you deserve. According to this see your sin and your Lord rightly. Sin isn't something light, it is turning to your Lord of all power and dominion and saying "You can go pound sand." It is rebellion against the almighty Lord who sacrificed Himself to save you. It is not a light thing. Repent. Truly, repent.

That sounds scary, and it is. This may make you question the quality of your faith. But I make this point for a good reason. If you have right faith but make Christ less than He is, how easy might it be to go from having repentant faith in the God of salvation, to "honoring" the Savior who takes away those annoying sins, to walking as best I can in the way of that nice, understanding rabbi, to I've got an arrangement with God that more or less works for me. How easy is it to go from faith to something else if Christ is not all the big?

Nathanael got it. He believed. At first He did not believe big enough. Jesus explained how He was much, much bigger—the Son of Man! He then proved Himself by His miracles. He then ultimately proved Himself by the cross and empty tomb. He is the Son of Man with dominion over all people and we are the temples of His Holy Spirit, His beloved possession. We cannot make Him too big because we can't even conceive of His glory. It is only by His unfathomable grace and love that we poor, fallen creatures are regarded by Him at all.

So you who are blessed by God, always strive to make Him greater as you live out your faith. To diminish Him as if you thereby are gaining some advantage in life is a fool's errand. It is dangerous.

He is the Son of God! He is the king of you—the New Israel. By grace you are His possession. Believe Him to be your greatest good always, because He always is, and by grace through faith, He always shall be.

Amen.