

Under the Fig Tree

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, Associate Rector,
at the nine o'clock service, January 15, 2012.
The Second Sunday After the Epiphany.
Based on John 1:43-51.*

This passage from the Gospel of John happens to be the same one assigned for the Feast of St. Bartholomew, our patron saint. Why? Bartholomew is only mentioned in our gospels three times, each simply in a list of the 12 apostles. No details, just his name.

Some scholars believe that Bartholomew was actually that apostle's last name and that his first name was Nathaniel—this very Nathaniel in our gospel of today. We can understand why the folks who choose the readings for saints' feast days would choose this more colorful reading from John. Here we have a story and a bit of personality to work with, so much better than a list of names.

Some churches have an abundance of material to work with for their Patronal saint's feast day: think of St. Patrick, St. James, St. Peter, St. Paul, St. Barnabas. I've always wondered how churches with important-but-not-saints names celebrate their feast days—or if they celebrate them.

Trinity is a doctrine, not a person, but we do have a Trinity Sunday. But what about the Church of the Heavenly Rest? Or the Church of the Holy Comforter? A friend of mine whose home church was named Holy Comforter insisted on referring to it, quite lovingly, as the Big Blanket.

At least we do have a real person: Bartholomew, Nathaniel Bartholomew—one of the 12 apostles, with sainthood conferred. Tradition holds one more interesting tidbit: it is thought that Bartholomew was martyred by being flayed alive (skinned with a tanner's knife). If you visit the Basilica of St. John Lateran in Rome, you see huge statues of the 12 apostles, each one depicted with some traditional object that helps you identify him. Peter, for example, holds a huge key, the key to the church/kingdom. Matthew holds a large tax ledger. Bartholomew carries what looks like a garment hanging over one arm. On second glance you realize he is carrying his own skin; in his other hand he carries a large flaying knife.

Very occasionally here, someone who has served St. Bart's with extraordinary leadership and distinction is awarded the St. Bartholomew's pin. It's a small red flaying knife. It tends to make those who wear it think twice.

Back to Bartholomew/Nathaniel under the fig tree. Just the day before, Jesus has called his first disciples. In John's version, this happens because the guys are following him—stalking is what I picture. When Jesus turns around and confronts them, they want to know where he is staying. Jesus invites them to “Come and see.” They go with him, stay for a while, and emerge as his new disciples.

Now it's the next day. Philip, one of Jesus' new disciples, finds his good friend Nathaniel under the fig tree. We don't know whether Philip went looking for Nathaniel, or whether he just sort of stumbled over him. We don't know exactly what Nathaniel was doing under that fig tree.

What do you know about fig trees? The only fig tree I've had real personal experience with was in a friend's back yard in my hometown in South Carolina. The climate there is mild, not unlike the Mediterranean climate of Nathaniel's fig tree. The South Carolina fig tree grew so prolifically that my friends had to trim it back each fall to keep it from taking over the yard and house. They'd wrap it securely for the winter to protect it from frost or snow. Then in the spring they'd unwrap it and their beloved tree would flourish again and produce sweet figs in abundance.

What I remember especially were how huge the fig tree's deep green leaves were. When I saw them, I deeply understood this verse from Genesis [3:7]: “Then the eyes of Adam and Eve were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.” A few of those leaves would easily make a dress. You can imagine what thick shade a fig tree can provide, and how very inviting that would be on a hot, sunny day, of which there would be many in Galilee.

Nathaniel was under the fig tree. This may explain why the Feast of St. Bartholomew occurs on August 24, traditionally a time when many of us are off under our fig trees. Which may explain why, so far as I know, St. Bart's has never had a big blow-out party to celebrate our Patronal feast. It's hard to have a big party when so many people, including the church leadership, are traditionally on vacation!

Is Nathaniel under his fig tree chilled out, having a siesta? Is he playing hooky from work? Is he hiding from something or someone? At Philip's big news, “We've found the one Moses and the prophets wrote about: Jesus of Nazareth!” Nathaniel seems less than impressed, sarcastic even: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

This is New Yorkers saying, “Can anything good come out of New Jersey?” This is New Jersey saying, “Can anything good come out of South Carolina?” This is South Carolina saying, “Can anything good come out of California?” This is California saying, “Can anything good come out of Texas?” This is Texas saying, “Can anything good come out of any place that is not Texas?” (I can say this because I've lived in all these places!)

Right now this is a large portion of the United States saying, “Can anything good come out of a primary?”

In Jesus' time, Nazareth was an uninteresting backwater, not known for much of anything, certainly not known for its citizens' goodness—not a very nice place.

What is your particular Nazareth, where Nazareth may be other than a physical location? Can anything good come out of losing a job? Losing a house? Losing your savings? Can anything good come out of a divorce, or a life-changing accident? Can anything good come out of cancer? Out of struggles with addiction or depression? Can anything good come out of this recession?

Philip says to Nathaniel, "Come and see." To Nathaniel's credit, he doesn't rest on his stereotype; he stirs himself to leave the pleasant shade or the comfort or the refuge of the fig tree. What happens next changes his life forever.

Nathaniel comes to see this Jesus from Nazareth, only to find that Jesus has already seen him. Seen him not just in the obvious way as the guy under the fig tree, but seen into Nathaniel's very nature and character. Jesus sees to the core of who Nathaniel is and who he can become. Which in turn causes Nathaniel to see beyond the obvious of this guy from Nazareth, to perceive who Jesus really is and who he will become.

Seeing clearly *what is* and even more importantly seeing *what is possible*—that is what we call vision.

Vision is more than important; it is necessary. You may remember one of our Proverbs: "When there is no vision, the people perish" [*Proverbs 29:18, KJV*]. Who can forget President John F. Kennedy's statement: "Within 10 years, this country will land a man on the moon and return him safely to the earth." Who can forget Dr. Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech?

In this community of St. Bart's, think of the visions (plural) that have inspired us to become the church we are today. I think particularly of one vision, so simply stated, that continues to inspire us and make us who we are, and at the same time keeps challenging us to become who we are meant to be. That vision: Radical Welcome.

Our vision of Radical Welcome means: No matter who you are, where you come from, what you are wearing, what work you do or don't do, what you have done in your life or not done—you are welcome here. That is not just our own welcome we are extending; it is God's own welcome as we understand it. It is the welcome of a God who sees us deeply as we are, loves us deeply as we are, and who sees beyond what we are to what we can become. When we feel deeply known and welcomed as we are, who knows what might happen? Our lives, like Nathaniel's, may be changed forever.

Without the vision of Radical Welcome, we at St. Bart's would not be who we are today. But vision is about the future, not about the past. As someone has said, "You can't invite someone to be part of the past. You can invite someone to be part of the future." [*The Rev. Brian Stoffregen, <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/john1x43.htm>*]

St. Bart's is poised on the brink of a significant transition. What new vision may emerge that both sees us clearly as we are and challenges us to become the community God intends us to be? How might we trust that God will do "even greater things" with us?

The questions about vision are not intended to put pressure on one person. Vision is, I believe, most often a collective thing, made up of many shared thoughts and conversations, though it may be articulated by one person. Kennedy didn't dream up the "10 years to the moon" idea; it was the result of many conversations about the hard work NASA had already done. Martin Luther King's dream emerged from the shared experiences of and conversations with many, many people.

I think there is a connection between what I call "fig tree time" and vision. Jesus was known to slip away by himself fairly often to have some quiet time, to pray, to reconnect with himself and with God, to get clear on who he was and what he was to do. "Martin Luther King regularly took a 'Day of Silence' to pray, plan, and listen. Listening was his lifeline. It was a critical part of his prophetic witness."

[<http://www.odysseynetworks.org/news/onscripture-1-samuel-3-1-20>]

Time under the fig tree is a good thing—even necessary, I would argue—and hard to come by in our age of constant busy-ness and 24-hour everything.

As individuals and as a community, let's spend some time under our fig trees, intentionally. Under our fig trees, where we can bring our tiredness, our prayers, our skepticism. In the quiet and shade and refuge of our fig trees, let's be deeply quiet and "without deceit"—that is, honest—and let the dreams and visions form.

And then let's let ourselves be drawn—by curiosity, by faith, by something—back out into the sun, into taking a risk, into seeing new possibilities. Let's invite others, as we have been invited, "Come and see."

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