

*Nate the Great*

The star of our gospel reading today is everyone's favorite disciple, the most popular apostle of all time, the follower of Christ that so many churches, schools and hospitals are named after... Nathaniel? Well, what I said is not really true. I've never met anyone who said that Nathaniel was his favorite disciple. There is exactly one Nathaniel Lutheran Church among the ELCA's more than 10,000 congregations. And in the Bible, this passage is the only place where Nathaniel is mentioned by name, other than in lists of all the apostles. In fact, a lot of scholars suggest that in the Bible Nathaniel is also known as Bartholomew. Poor Nathaniel, history can't even get his name straight!

Do you ever feel like a Nathaniel: a no name, a nothing, a nobody. Life can make us feel that way sometimes. In school, were you ever the last person picked for the dodge ball team... me neither, but I bet the kids who didn't get picked really got upset about it. Oh, I would have been so hurt if that had ever happened to me... which, of course, it didn't. But perhaps you were passed over for a promotion you really deserved. Or maybe you fixed a special dinner for your family and everybody was too busy to sit down and eat. Or maybe someone you really care about doesn't even know you're alive.

Once when I was a medical technologist there was a blizzard and I walked to work. I was one of the few employees to make it in to the hospital at all that day, and the director of my department came by and said to me that what I had done would not be forgotten. What reward did I get for that? None. Nada. Zip. The Big Goose

Egg. The next time I passed the director in the hallway he didn't even make eye contact. I guess the way I felt is how we might expect Nathaniel to feel.

Yet, I think we can make a very strong case that actually Nathaniel was a somebody, he was someone special, and his name should be honored. Jesus noticed Nathaniel. We cannot understand by what power Jesus knew Nathaniel's name and personality even before he met him, but we can say for sure that Jesus knew Nathaniel to be a worthwhile person for his inner circle of disciples. Jesus saw potential in Nathaniel. Jesus said that Nathaniel was a true Israelite in whom there was no deceit. Wouldn't it be great to hear Jesus say something like that to us? Wouldn't you love to hear Jesus say to you, "You are a true Christian, totally honest and sincere?"

That's the point, I believe. Jesus notices the people that usually don't get noticed. Jesus doesn't overlook the people that often get overlooked. He sees us as we really are. He sees the untapped potential inside each of us, and he wants us for his team. The rest of the world may let us down. We may not always get the appreciation or respect we deserve. We may not always get the recognition or affection we crave. But God is on our side.

God is for us. He knows our troubles, and he himself, in Jesus, has been through worse. So we can trust him when he says, "It's going to be alright." His presence comforts us and fills us with hope. One day he will exult us when we live and reign with him in his Kingdom. Jesus promised Nathaniel that he would see even greater things, and he did, and so will we and all the baptized.

That Nathaniel would receive such a promise is kind of ironic after his initial reaction to Philip's invitation. Philip told Nathaniel that he had found the Messiah, the anointed one that Moses and the prophets had promised, and that Jesus, the Messiah, was from Nazareth. Nathaniel's retort was to basically say that nothing good could come from Nazareth. It may have been kind of like if someone told us that something good came from Cleveland, we simply wouldn't believe that it was possible.

But it was true; Jesus, the Messiah, came from Nazareth. Isn't that just like God to use the most unlikely people from the most unlikely places? God often comes to us in the most surprising ways and through the most surprising people. We can never predict who he is going to call to do his work or when. Consider this overview of Biblical history: God called Abraham and Sarah when they were quite old. He called Samuel, the hero of the first lesson today, when he was quite young. God called Moses, a shepherd, through a burning bush. Isaiah was called to be a prophet while worshipping in the Temple. And God spoke to Solomon, a king, in a dream. We could go on, but that well establishes, I think, that God speaks to a diverse group of humanity and calls us in any number of different ways. Yet, our response to God's call should always be more or less the same.

Nathaniel responded to Jesus' telling him how he had seen Nathaniel under the fig tree with a worshipful confession of faith. That miracle prompted Nathaniel to declare that Jesus was the Son of God and the King of Israel. Powerful stuff. It is right and healthy for us to respond to Jesus in a similar worshipful way. The blessings in our lives are just that, blessings, not luck or coincidence or the fruit of our labor. When we do not worship and praise God, then something is missing from our life.

When we do not acknowledge Christ, as he acknowledges us, then life gets out of balance. We cannot live well without a proper relationship to the author and giver of all life, and that proper relationship is expressed in loving obedience and proclaiming his holy name. We do that symbolically in our worship. After the sermon, the proclamation of God's Word, we respond by singing a hymn and then confessing the Creed.

Of course, before responding to God's Word, we have to hear God's Word. What Samuel says when the Lord calls him is so perfect, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." That's the proper attitude for all of us. God speaks to us through the Bible, sometimes he speaks to us through wise friends, and he speaks to us sometimes in the innermost parts of our hearts. But often we miss his call. We fail to focus. We let the world drown out God's voice. But when we hear, when we are ready to listen, when we respond in faith, the possibilities are endless.

Who knows where God will take you? Who knows what God will have you do? Some are called to service in the church. Some are called to the helping professions or other careers in the world. Anything we do we can do for Christ if we do it with honesty and integrity and with an eye for the good of others. God is calling each of us to go where we can do the most good. Listen and follow, and, like Nathaniel, you will see even greater things than you have ever seen before. Amen.