

The Difference Between Lost and Found

John 1:43-51

Morning Prayer – October 9, 2011

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.' Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.' Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.'

Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!' Nathanael asked him, 'Where did you come to know me?' Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.' Nathanael replied, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!' Jesus answered, 'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.' And he said to him, 'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'

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My niece, Naomi, is being baptized this morning in Kansas City. She is about four months old, and about the cutest thing you have ever seen.

She also has done nothing to deserve (or not to deserve) the claim of God's grace in Jesus Christ that will be sealed when the water touches her forehead this morning. That is an important part of our theology of grace in the Presbyterian Church...that God finds us, seeks us out, claims us before we even have a choice.

In the scripture I just read, Nathaniel's surprise was that Jesus already knew him. He asked Jesus the question, "Where did you come to know me?" Nathaniel heard about this Jesus from his friend Philip. He heard that Jesus was the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. Nathaniel was curious about this claim...maybe not yet convinced. He heard that Jesus was from a hick-town called Nazareth. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" he wondered out loud. But he followed Philip to see Jesus because he was curious. Curious enough to follow.

And that is where the surprise comes in. Because while Nathaniel thought he was looking for Jesus – the reality was that Jesus had already found him. That Jesus already knew him.

“How?” Nathaniel wondered... “Because I saw you under a fig tree...” Jesus answered.

My sister, who will be taking promises on her daughter’s behalf at the baptism this morning, offers the following observation about the relationship between being lost and found. So often, she says, the questions of the Christian community have to do with *seeking* Jesus. Of looking for ways to *connect* to Jesus. Of worrying that we are *lost without* Jesus. And recognizing that we have a – sometimes – desperate need to ask Jesus into our hearts in order to avoid the consequences.

Yet – at least according to the theology that makes us Presbyterians – the reality is that, while that seeking after Jesus is important and a valuable part of our faith, “it is always second to the truth that Jesus has already found us.”¹

Never are we lost. We start our lives by being found. And sure, our faith does take on significance and meaning when we seek after the life that Jesus calls us to lead – but that journey begins from the place of being welcomed by Jesus and claimed as one of his own.

For Nathaniel, it began at a fig tree. He didn’t find his faith there; his faith found him. Jesus recognized him and his gifts – and from that place of being found, Nathaniel dropped what he was doing and followed as Jesus’ disciple.

I’m in a preaching group with a friend who tells this story. Joe is the pastor at First Presbyterian, Dallas. He tells this story of himself:

I did not grow up being very active in church. My father was Irish Catholic, and he left the church at 18. My mom was a Methodist. When we went to church, that’s where we went. We were better than Christmas and Easter Christians, but not by much.

¹ I am grateful for the Rev. Meg Peery McLaughlin’s sermon, “Finding the Faith to Follow” which informed my re-preaching of this text!

That was part of the shock to me when I was approached about ministry. I didn't even go to Sunday school. How could I possibly pull off seminary? Can anything good come from a kid who was slack about going to church, whose parents divorced, who was a frat boy business major in college and now a banker who couldn't lend money to anyone who really needed it? Ministry? Me?

Those were my thoughts as I packed to go to Columbia Seminary. Then I uncovered an old Bible. It was genuine fake leather. A name was scrawled in gold in immaculate third grade penmanship across the front: "Joe John C." Inside it reads in brown magic marker, in my own handwriting, "Presented to Joe John Clifford by Rockville United Methodist Church, September 21, 1974."

It's the Bible I got the day mom and I happened to go to church, and they were presenting Bibles to the rising third grade Sunday school class.

"Will all the third graders please come forward," the nice woman said, and I went. She read the names engraved in gold on the covers of the Bibles as she handed them out down the line. She got to me and didn't know me from Adam's housecat. I wasn't on the Sunday school roll. But as a well-prepared director of Christian Education, she had extra Bibles in case there was someone like me. She asked me my name and announced it to the church. "This is Joe John Clifford, a child of God." The Bible had some gold foil in it that I could use for a do-it-yourself engraving.

As I packed for seminary that day, I heard somewhere in my soul, "I saw you under the fig tree before anyone asked you about ministry."

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We have, all of us, been found under our own fig trees. Faith has found us...so let's take a deep breath and follow where that faith leads.