

# **“Popular Prejudice”**

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Providence United Methodist Church

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The gospel lesson for today is taken from the book of John, chapter 1, verses 43 through 51. I'll be reading from Eugene Peterson's translation, *The Message*. The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. When he got there, he ran across Philip and said, "Come, follow me." (Philip's hometown was Bethsaida, the same as Andrew and Peter.) Philip went and found Nathanael and told him, "We've found the One Moses wrote of in the Law, the One preached by the prophets. It's *Jesus*, Joseph's son, the one from Nazareth!" Nathanael said, "Nazareth? You've got to be kidding."

But Philip said, "Come, see for yourself." When Jesus saw him coming he said, "There's a real Israelite, not a false bone in his body." Nathanael said, "Where did you get that idea? You don't know me." Jesus answered, "One day, long before Philip called you here, I saw you under the fig tree." Nathanael exclaimed, "Rabbi! You are the Son of God, the King of Israel!" Jesus said, "You've become a believer simply because I say I saw you one day sitting under the fig tree? You haven't seen anything yet! Before this is over you're going to see heaven open and God's angels descending to the Son of Man and ascending again."

This is God's word for God's people. Thanks be to God. Let's pray. God of all people, who is not partial or a respecter of anyone, who doesn't judge one's appearance or take sides with the popular opinion or prejudices—you are a God of love and equality and justice. You aren't prejudiced or biased toward any one group . . . . . Lord, open our ears. We trust you have prepared hearts. Compel us

to look at ourselves honestly as Nathaniel responded honestly to Jesus—to look inside and to be honest and truthful with ourselves. Amen.

I feel this message today is very timely. With Loyal Thurman speaking to us last Sunday what were your thoughts when you saw him? Were you a little taken back by his appearance? Did you wonder why a Christian might want so many tattoos on his body? Did you think his earrings were overstated? Did it cause you to feel uncomfortable about speaking with him face to face? Were you expecting someone to say—more “Christian looking?” Let’s take a look at a similar situation that occurred 2,000 years ago.

The scripture says that Jesus decided to go to Galilee. When he got there, he met Philip, and Philip followed him. Then the typical thing happened. Philip, who was filled with excitement after meeting Jesus went to tell his friend Nathaniel. Philip says to Nathaniel, “It’s Jesus, Joseph’s son, the one from Nazareth!” Nathanael says, “Nazareth? You’ve got to be kidding.” In so many words Nathaniel meant, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” I guess Nathaniel just couldn’t imagine anyone doing anything good who had come from that town.

You know, Nazareth, *that* town, *that town* where nobody important or gifted had ever been born, that seemingly low-down town, that community that was called “nothing nowhere town,” that town on the other side of the tracks, a town that looked like it had been regurgitated and spit back out by nobodies. Nobody important had ever come from Nazareth—nobody that is—except for Jesus.

Nathaniel was not impressed with Jesus in the least. He had this negative mindset, maybe it was a popular prejudice at that time. Whatever it was, it was bias and bigoted. Nathaniel had a lot of preconceived notions about Nazareth, and because of that preconception, he was negative about Jesus too. He knew that Jesus was from Nazareth, and that settled that. Jesus had to be a loser. I can just hear

Nathaniel thinking when he saw Jesus, “Just take a look at him! He’s from that loser town.”

Well now that we’ve heard what Nathaniel thinks of Jesus so far. What do you think of Nathaniel? What do you make of him? Do you think Nathaniel was prejudiced? He saw Jesus, heard where he was from, and immediately formed an opinion—sounds like he was a little arrogant too. Philip, who had a relationship with Nathaniel challenges him and says “Come, see for yourself.”

Some of us some of the time can have negative mindsets don’t you think? We feel prejudice against certain kinds of people. But it’s just not enough to stand at a distance, in our comfort zones, in our arrogance, and formulate these destructive opinions. And to make it worse, we can actually voice these opinions to our friends and spread the poison of prejudice. Prejudice—it doesn’t have to be against a race or religion or even against a sexual orientation. It can just be when we reject others. We keep them at a distance. In our opinion, they come from some place or some position we don’t agree with.

As Christians, our mindset should emulate Jesus. It’s what Philip did. He didn’t argue with his friend, he just said, “Come and see.” Someone who isn’t even willing to check something out is a coward. They just want to find fault without really examining the situation or meeting the person. Someone who actually takes the time to come and see is brave and has courage. They’re willing to change their mind if they see that they’re wrong. They’re not afraid to step away from their prejudice. That’s what Nathaniel did. He took a chance that he just might be wrong about Jesus.

When Nathaniel met Jesus he believed him to be the Son of God, the King of Israel. He opened his heart to see the truth of his bias and bigotry, and he let go of it. Nathaniel was washed from his popular prejudice and received people he

once rejected. He allowed his heart the opportunity to be free. He put off his old ways and put on God's new ways.

In every one of our hearts God places a yearning and a need to know the one who created us to love and to be loved. Nathaniel changed, and he wasn't the only one. The apostle Peter changed. At one time he was called Simon, but became a rock that was stable and immovable. He once refused to be seen with Jesus when it wasn't popular. Then he changed, and preached to thousands the saving power of Christ. And James and John, they were called the "Sons of Thunder" and known for their short tempers. They became fishers of people and used their passion to win people to Christ. And Thomas, who wouldn't believe in the resurrected Christ until he saw the nail prints in Jesus' hands, and then proclaimed him as "My Lord and My God."

When we do meet Jesus we change. Our mindsets from the past are different because the love of Christ has opened our heart. We're now willing to confront the things in our lives that need to be changed. We recognize our prejudice and bias, and overtime, we no longer want it to be a part of who we are—because we follow Jesus and we're brave enough to "come and see." Do we entertain and hold on to a popular prejudice? Are we willing to admit that we need to let it go?

We serve a God of love, equality, and justice. There is no prejudice that we can hold onto that is acceptable to a God of love. There may be times when we feel powerless to stop injustice in the world, but we should work hard to never allow it to invade our thinking and behavior. When we encounter Christ as Nathaniel did help us to be honest with ourselves. Let's admit to the injustice of our own prejudice that we're holding onto. Let's pray. God, who has created us in love, open our hearts and minds. Help us to fix our eyes on you. Show us the urgency to desire your presence. Move in us to allow the Holy Spirit to transform those

qualities that don't conform to your image. We have come and seen the Lord.  
Work the desired love and justice in us that's needed. In Christ's name we pray.  
Amen.