

Transforming Skeptical-Stereotypism through God's Love

Nathanael said to Phillip: "*Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*"

When Jesus saw Nathanael, he said of him, "*Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.*"

Stereotype: Noun. Definition 1: A widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing.

I would add or place.

I worked in the Circulation Department of the Telegram Tribune (fondly known to many as the TT). My position was one of multi-tasking internal things while taking care of external things—namely customer telephone calls.

Picture a map of San Luis Obispo County. Each section has a name (like North County or Coast) and within each section are towns. Each of these sections, for me, had a personality and each town and a more detailed personality. When I was first hired in the 1980's, we did not have computers. Everything about a customer was on real paper. Customers were identified by their zip code first and then their address. Eventually we got computers which identified customers by their telephone number. But no matter whether it was the zip-code or the prefix on their telephone I knew where the customer was calling from. For example, if it was 93465 zip-code or 434 prefix I knew it was Templeton. I had a preconceived notion as to how people from Templeton would be. Based on these stereotypes, I was prepared for what I expected to be either an easy call or a difficult one. Again, I based my approach to each call according to the story in my head about where the person was from.

The idea of stereotyping people based on where they live is not a new concept. Nathanael's town of Bethsaida was a good 10 to 12 hours walk from Nazareth but just like people who live in Pismo know about Atascadero, Nathanael would have known about Nazareth.

Historians agree that the Nazareth of Jesus's day was basically a podunk blip of a place with very poor folks who eeked out a meager existence. So, in Nathanael's mind, it would be inconceivable that the Messiah—the promised King of Israel would come from such a place. Now, if Phillip had said Sepphoris, the rich city just west and over the hill from Nazareth, it might have made more sense.

I think Nathanael represents that part of our humanness that is at once skeptical and judgmental, but also inquisitive.

It seems we are just prone to do this. I remember when I was about 15, I met a teenage relative on a visit to Columbus, Ohio. Because I came from California, she assumed I had seen, if not met, many movie stars. She was disappointed that I had not.

We assume people are a certain way because they are: Australian, Scottish, Italian, South American, Nigerian, or Mexican; from Georgia, or Mississippi, or New Jersey, or Salt Lake City, or Los Angeles, or San Francisco, or ...

We base our likes and dislikes on the stereotypes that we create for ourselves, or that are created for us in the media or by people we are associated with.

Tomorrow is a national holiday remembering the birth of Martin Luther King, Jr. The prevailing stereotype is that he was merely a southern black Baptist preacher from Georgia. But he rose out of that narrow regional stereotype to become the iconic symbol of the opposite. He became a voice for stereotyped people in this country who are judged a "certain way" based on the color of their skin or where they happen to be born or whom they happen to love. His voice has surpassed his work on behalf of black people from the South to include countless people who are stereotyped and thus excluded, if not all together shunned, by a culture that resists the call to "come and see" and be at unity with all God's people.

Being called by God, as Nathanael was, as Martin Luther King, Jr. was, is a gift but one needs to be open to that gift. That gift is Love. God's Love which transforms us and lets us see a reality that removes the skeptical, stereotypical, judgmental lens from the eyes of our hearts and replaces it with a lens that sees all people as one in their many colors—as a field of flowers of every kind is still a field of flowers.

As we know, not everyone accepted Jesus's call. In fact, most rejected it. They could not remove the log from their own eyes—John 1:11-13 says: "*He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.*"

When Jesus speaks to Nathanael, he teases him a little with mild sarcasm. Nathanael realizes his folly and quickly asserts this: "Rabbi, you are the Son of God!". Jesus acknowledges Nathanael's openness to coming with Phillip and blesses him saying, "You will see greater things".

How does our own skeptical-stereotyping voice keep us from coming to Jesus with open hearts and minds? Can we be like Nathanael and Martin Luther King, Jr? Can we hear Jesus's voice of love and compassion over the voices of our own folly in judging others by the stereotype told to us by media or by well-meaning family or friends? What does it look like when we come to Jesus and surrender our prejudice and judgement? Are we not transformed?

The gift God offers us through Jesus Christ is that perfect love which allows us to break down the barriers—the walls that keep us from being at unity with one another and with all creation. It gives us the eyes to see beyond town, state, country, culture, race, color—to see that we are all of us related in Christ's body.

Those of you who are baptized Episcopalians know the Covenant that we commit to at our baptism. It is our commitment to God and to one another to strive to become the force that unifies, brings justice to the world that God loves.

In a moment Fr. Rob and I are going to renew our baptismal vow together now. For those of you who know it, please join in the responses to renew your own covenant. It can be found on page 304 of The Book of Common Prayer. If you are not familiar with the covenant, please listen to the words and see how they can move you to the transformation of your own skepticism and prejudice through God's gift of Love brought to us in Jesus Christ.

The Baptismal Covenant

Celebrant Do you believe in God the Father?

People I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

Celebrant Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God?

People I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit
and born of the Virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.
He descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again.
He ascended into heaven,
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

Celebrant Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit?

People I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.

Celebrant Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers?

People I will, with God's help.

Celebrant Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

People I will, with God's help.

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Celebrant Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

People I will, with God's help.

Celebrant Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

People I will, with God's help.

Celebrant Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

Rev. Susan Arnold
Epiphany 2 Year B 2021

People I will, with God's help.