To Be Seen and to See

John 1:43-51

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.” When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” Nathanael asked him, “Where did you get 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.”

[Taking out Phone, scrolling]

Woah! Holy moly. Hey, you gotta see this. Check it out!

Can you believe it?

Sometimes when my wife and I are looking at our phones at night, and scrolling through whatever social media app we have open, occasionally one of us will say, “wow.” Or “Holy Cow,” and the other will say, “what?” and then the first will say, “Look at this!”

My kids sometimes see videos of silly things at school that their teachers show them, like someone who made an obstacle course for the squirrels in his back yard. They came home last week and said, “Dad! you gotta see this!”

They invited me to see what they had seen. They wanted me and Kristen to be a part of the wonder of something new that they hadn’t seen before.
In today’s Gospel Philip finds Nathanael and says, “We’ve found the one that Moses wrote about, and he’s from Nazareth!” and Nathanael gives one of the most incredulous lines in scripture: “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” And Philip replies, “You gotta see this! Come and See!”

I’ve been wondering lately about what Christianity is all about. How would you describe Christianity to someone who didn’t know about it and you only had a few minutes to tell them? Last week Vicar Paul reminded us of our baptismal promises, and that following Jesus might be summed up in our baptism which unites us in community, allows the Holy Spirit to enhance our gifts, and joins us to live God’s mission in the world.

This week I suggest that being a Christian is all about Seeing and Being Seen.

Philip sees Jesus and follows. He must see something amazing in Christ, for he then extends the invitation to follow Jesus to Nathanael.

Nathanael approaches Jesus, and Jesus speaks first saying: “Nathanael, in you I see a person who is sincere, and has no deceit.” Nathanael is taken aback by this. He asks, “Wait, have we met? How do you know me?” And Jesus says, “I saw you before you saw me. I know you. I know who you are and I know the gifts you bring. Come and see even more amazing things than this.”

Before Nathanael can see Jesus. Before he can meet him, Jesus sees Nathanael.

Throughout these last 10 months, maybe you have felt like no one sees you. Like you don’t see anyone else. For many of us we see our colleagues and family and friends through computer screens, which can only show so much, and isn’t the same as being in a room with someone, feeling their energy, their presence. When we do get out of our houses, we’ve been asked to wear masks to protect the most vulnerable among us. And so even when we meet people, it is difficult for us to see them.

I met someone at a funeral this past week, which we held at the graveside. She was bundled up in a parka, a hat, a hood, and had a mask on, and was wearing sunglasses. I have no idea what she looked like. I wouldn’t recognize her if I saw her again!
Yet as isolated as we feel, as lonely as many of us have felt, Jesus sees us. Our God in Christ knows us. Psalm 139 reminds us that God has formed us and made us, and knows every part of us. We are fearfully and wonderfully made by God who understands and sees us. We cannot hide from God, not during a pandemic, not during our most embarrassing moments, not during times when we wish we are completely alone, because God sees us, and loves us anyway. All of us. God sees you, knows you, and loves you.

And like Samuel, who God could see and knew that Samuel had gifts to share, God calls us to more.

This Monday we remember Martin Luther King, Jr. a Christian pastor, who dedicated his life to helping this country see better. MLK preached about the injustice people of color experienced on a daily basis. MLK argued for help for those who are poor. He advocated for those who we would rather not see. And as a Christian pastor he understood that the opposition to progress is not just hate, but indifference. Silence in the face of injustice, is consent to injustice. And so MLK said, “Take the first step in faith. You don't have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step.”

Our God in Jesus the Christ, sees us, and knows us. That is the first part of understanding what it is to be a Christian. That we are loved with more grace than we deserve or can understand. You are Seen, and understood, and loved.

The second, more complicated and difficult part of being a Christian, of following the Christ, is to allow our vision to be changed, and take the next step towards God’s justice, in faith. Jesus sees Nathanael, and Nathanael in response says, “You are the Son of God!” Nathanael sees the world differently after experiencing the loving and understanding gaze of Jesus.

On social media, sometimes I see videos of people who have been given special new glasses. These people are color-blind, and when a loved one gives them these new glasses, the glasses are designed to do what their eyes currently don’t do, and that is to breakdown the light we see into the whole range of colors. So when they put on the glasses they all do about same thing. They put them on, look around for a second, take them off to check again, they put them on again, and then, in all of these videos that
I’ve seen, the person begins to weep. They weep, I assume, for the wide range of color that they have been missing, they weep for the gift of seeing differently, they weep for the sheer beauty of the world in which we live.

To be a Christian is to see the world differently than we did before. It is to take on the vision of Christ. It is perhaps to see, and weep for the beauty of the world and the beauty of each human being.

Seeing like Christ means seeing those who the world doesn’t want to acknowledge, and recognizing them. It means seeing the poor in our communities and around the world. Seeing with Christ’s vision means recognizing the humanity, and the God-created, fearfully and wonderfully made beautiful Child of God in each person we encounter: in our spouse, in our children, in our family, in our friends, and in our neighbors. It also means seeing those we disagree with as Children of God first. It means recognizing the humanity and that spark of the Holy Spirit that is in people who describe themselves in an entire range of political parties or who come from a different country, or who have skin color that doesn’t match mine, or who act and dress differently than what I’m used to.

And it means loving them. Sometimes loving means agreeing. Sometimes loving means challenging. Sometimes loving means holding people to account and asking for repentance.

But loving your neighbor begins with seeing each person as God does: as a person who has value and dignity because God loves them.

Friends, God sees you. God knows who you are. God loves you as God’s child.

As we accept, and sometimes struggle to accept, that love, we then turn our eyes, and our senses to our neighbors. And we follow Christ's lead in seeing them as worthy of love, and of being truly seen.

God sees you. May we see one another in the same light.

May it indeed be so, and Amen.