

## **The Church of the Good Shepherd**

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The Second Sunday after Epiphany – January 14, 2018

John 1:43-41

I love the library. I love libraries like the one in Old Town Fairfax, new and nice with lots of natural light and comfortable, attractive sitting areas that invite you to relax and enjoy the quiet. I even love battered and worn downtown libraries, like the one in my former hometown of Austin, Texas. That library is like many urban central library branches: located in an old and outdated building in a questionable part of town. You can feel the air of deferred maintenance as soon as you enter it. It is also located near a large population of the city's homeless and urban poor, who congregate there to get out of the weather and to rest and relax in safety, often causing considerable discomfort among the more privileged patrons.

This is a common situation found in most urban central libraries, and is becoming increasingly the case in library branches outside the urban core as well. A lot of big-city libraries view their homeless patrons as a problem to confront. Library staff post long lists of rules in an attempt prevent eating, sleeping, bringing in too many belongings, and generally being disruptive in the building. The staff make half-hearted attempts at enforcing the rules, but mostly, it seems that everyone, including the other patrons, try to pretend like these beaten-down, marginalized, and often unclean people are not there at all. Until someone acts out and then is quickly escorted from the building.

The downtown central library in Dallas, however, has tried a different approach. They found that the lengthy list of rules posted around the building were largely disregarded. They found that ignoring the homeless patrons or pretending they weren't there not only didn't run them off but didn't seem to reduce any of the acting out. So, they tried something different – instead of discouraging the presence of the downtown homeless, they chose to welcome them.

They instituted a program that includes and extends hospitality to their homeless patrons. Rather than seeing a group of people as a problem that needs to be dealt with, they chose instead to see individuals to be welcomed. So, they took down the long lists of rules and all the “no” signs (like no eating, no sleeping, and so on) and replaced them with signs that say things like “respect others”. They began to coordinate with other organizations that assist the homeless to bring some of their assistance in-house and to develop some targeted programs to engage and serve this population.

The most important change, however, was how the library staff viewed their homeless patrons. Having learned that many of the behavioral problems could be remedied by communicating and engaging the homeless patrons personally, they introduced what they call the “Wal-Mart method” and had library staff greet all patrons when they entered the library, and stressed the importance of simply smiling and making eye contact with their homeless patrons since so many people will not.

The staff at the central Dallas library chose to see and get to know the homeless people who frequented their library. They engaged and communicated with them. They welcomed rather than ignored them. They saw them as human individuals rather than an anonymous and troublesome group. And having been seen and known, many of them responded in kind, treating the library, staff, and other patrons with respect, which has resulted in fewer outbursts and not one official complaint against a homeless person over a year.

Our Gospel lesson today is also about seeing and being seen... knowing and being known. This lesson is the second half of John's account of Jesus' calling of his first disciples. Just before where our lesson picks up, John the Baptist is with two of his disciples, Andrew and another unnamed disciple, when he sees Jesus walking towards him. "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" John exclaims. Curious, the disciples begin to follow Jesus. Jesus seeing them following, asks them "What are you seeking?" They ask him where he is staying and Jesus replies, "Come and see," and they do, spending the rest of the day with him. Andrew then goes off bring his brother Simon to join them saying, "We have found the Messiah." When Andrew presents his brother to Jesus, Jesus looks at him and says, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas."

When Jesus asks, "What are you seeking?", I think that the disciples really didn't know – that they were not able to put into words the deepest desire of their hearts. Not able to speak of this longing, they instead answer Jesus' question with one of their own: "Where are you staying?" Their question may better be translated as "Where do you abide? Where can we be in the very presence of God?" Jesus sees and knows them – knows the longing of their hearts – and simply replies: "Come and see." With these three simple words, Jesus says so much more. Come and see...follow me and see for yourself who I am. Come and pay attention and you will know me and, through knowing me, you will know the One who sent me. Come into my light and you, too, will reflect God's glory into the world.

Our lesson today picks up this story the very next day. Jesus has begun his journey back to Galilee and along the way he comes upon Philip, to whom he makes the simple invitation: "Follow me." Philip rushes to find Nathanael to encourage him to join him, saying, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." To which, Nathanael bushes off Philip's comment, saying, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" In response, Philip then uses the same words that as Jesus just the day before, "Come and see." When Nathanael does just that, he is surprised to find himself already known by Jesus, having seen him earlier while he sat under a fig tree. By seeing him, Jesus knew him and the longings of his heart. And by being seen and known, Nathanael was then able to see and know Jesus for who is truly is: the Son of God and King of Israel.

Seeing and being seen, knowing and being known, this is the focus of both these stories. John's seeing leads to testifying that Jesus is the Lamb of God. The disciples' seeing leads to following and evangelizing. Jesus' seeing leads to calling and knowing. Seeing leads to following; following leads to sharing the good news; and all of this leads to transformation and new life. But the story with Nathanael and Philip shows us that, human nature being what it is, we often get in our own way. Sometimes, we have a hard time seeing past the surface of things. When Philip urges Nathanael to come with him – that he has found the one for whom they all have waited and their hearts desire – Nathanael is dismissive, asking "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

This really isn't such a ridiculous question. At that time, Nazareth was just a small village in the outskirts of Sepphoris in Galilee – the sticks, if you will – far, far from the political and religious seat of power. The Hebrew Scriptures never mention Nazareth nor associate with it any messianic expectations. It most certainly was not a place from which anyone expected the Messiah to arise. And in Nathanael's view, Jesus was probably nothing more than a simple Jew from an insignificant village. It's like saying savior of the world has come from Elgin, North Dakota. Seriously...out of Elgin? Like Nathanael, we too would do well to recognize how our

own prejudices close our eyes and ears to what and who is before us. It is so easy to not see what is really before you because it doesn't align with our expectations.

To counter Nathanael's quick dismissal, Philip mirror's Jesus' and makes the simple plea: "Come and see." By doing so, Nathanael discovers himself known and able to know Jesus as the one through whom God is working. Come and see. These are powerful words. With these words, we are called to see not just the face shaped and colored by one's life circumstances, but the life behind and within one's face. The life that is loved and treasured by God... the life that is worthy of love and dignity. To be seen and known – I believe this is the deepest desire of our hearts. Before we can be loved, we must be seen. And before we can share this gift of love and grace with our neighbors, we must first see them.... see who they are, behind how and what they are.

It was just this kind of seeing that the staff of the central Dallas library employed with their homeless patrons. They decided to see and know the life behind and within the faces of the very people they previously ignored. And in doing so, they saw and treated them not as a problem to be solved but as individuals to be welcomed – individuals worthy and deserving of being known. Who knows what changes this will bring about? Perhaps this will be transformative for all of them, library staff and patrons. Perhaps in this seeing and knowing, they also encounter the presence of the One for whom they have waited so long, for whom their hearts desire. Perhaps as they know themselves to be known, they will be transformed by this knowing and loving to be a light in the darkness, drawing others to the brightness of their light.

Amen.