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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

The Second Sunday after the Epiphany (Series B)

January 18, 2015

Text: John 1:43–51

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Christ's Church has had to decide on numerous occasions what kind of Church she was going to be. They had to make that decision at the Jerusalem Council. According to Acts 15, the question was whether or not the Church would be primarily a Jewish Church or would it welcome the Gentiles, the various nations outside of the Israel. Under God's grace and by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Church embraced the Gentiles. The Church and Christ's Gospel proclaimed by the Church would be for all nations; no exceptions. Jesus is the Savior of the nations.

The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod had to decide about 100 years ago if she was going to be primarily a German Church for German speaking people or a Church that embraced the various cultures, nations, and ethnicities found within the United States. Through much anguish and understandable fear, the Missouri Synod adopted the English language and came to terms with the conviction that she needs to reach out to more than German immigrants.

Since the 17th Century, the beginning of the so-called Enlightenment, the Church has debated how to incorporate into her theology and practice the use of human reason, particularly intellectual skepticism and various forms of literary criticism. And as if this weren't enough, the Church had to consider how and to what extent she would use the growing body of knowledge coming from the flourishing natural sciences. Can the Church embrace scientists, philosophers, and skeptics? That debate is on-going and vigorous. Just do a Google search on words like "faith and reason", "the Bible and science", "the Church and modern culture" and you'll be inundated with millions of options. Entire annual conferences are dedicated to these topics. Libraries are filled with books and journals exploring these themes.

So, is Christ's Church a place for skeptics? Those who, by nature or training, question conventional wisdom or accepted religious teachings. Or is the Church only for those who accept religious truth claims at face value, with little or no evidence and no hard, verifiable, empirical facts. Is there room for questions and doubt in the Church?

Today's gospel reading from John 1 is quite helpful in answering these kinds of questions. Two kinds of individuals are found in today's reading. The first is Philip. He seems to be the kind of person who is impulsive, quick to believe, and fervent in his convictions. According to vs. 43, Jesus finds Philip and issues the call to discipleship, "Follow me."

The Gospel doesn't provide any details but Philip seems to be one of those quick and ready converts to Christianity. He's the kind of person who hears the call of faith in Christ's Gospel and embraces it quickly, ardently, and firmly. In some ways, he's the stereotypical disciple; at least, stereotypical in the sense of how many people think people become religious converts. I disagree with such canned stereotypes but...we, that's what this sermon is all about. Is the Church for various kinds of people with different temperaments.

Today's Gospel also tells us that Philip is from Bethsaida, the same city as Andrew and Peter, both of whom have become disciples of Jesus. And we learn that Philip finds Nathanael. You can hear Philip's zeal and enthusiasm for Jesus with how he describes the Lord to Nathanael, "We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph" (vs. 45).

Can't you hear the excitement?! "We've found Him! He's the one described in the Holy Scriptures. His name is Jesus. He's from Nazareth. You've just got to meet Him. You'll never be the same again. He's the one!" The Church has always readily embraced men and women like Philip. And well we should!

But then we find Nathanael. How does he respond to Philip's witness about Jesus? His initial response is found in vs. 46, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Can you hear the skepticism? Can you hear the question about the legitimacy of such a truth claim?

Nazareth was a Podunk military town in the northern regions of Galilee. Nazareth isn't mentioned in the OT; and Galilee was looked upon by the Jews from the south with suspicion due to that region's history of adopting pagan practices. It has a reputation, the less than savory kind. Its history is questionable. And Nazareth is a military outpost for the Roman army. All those pagan soldiers with lots of time on their hands...well, maybe you get the gist of Nathanael's question, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" The Messiah? From there?

Philip's response to Nathanael's honest skepticism is priceless and filled with wisdom. Vs. 46, "Come and see." I like to think of Philip's response meaning something like this...Skeptical are you? Got some doubts? That's ok. Once you meet Jesus, things will fall into place for you. Don't take my word for it. Let me introduce you to Jesus and He'll answer your questions and concerns."

I want to pause for a moment. Nathanael's skepticism and doubt are rooted in a desire to know the truth. The Lord Himself says this about Nathanael, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!" (vs. 47). His doubt and questions arise from a desire to know the truth. Many people today are skeptical about Christianity. Not because they don't want to know the truth but let's be honest with ourselves, the Church has a reputation. To use Nathanael's phrase, "Can anything good come from the Church?" The Church is described by many as being corrupt, immoral, power-hungry, and hypocritical. Some of this reputation has merit. The Church is made up of sinful people who do sinful things. But much of this reputation is unjust.

It's beyond the scope of one sermon to try to untangle fact from fiction. But when people criticize the history of the Church, you should always keep in mind this wise principle, "There always another side to the story." Come to the adult Bible class. We discuss these kinds of things quite often. Give me a call or stop by the church study. We can discuss the merits and demerits of the Church's history and practice over a cup of coffee or lunch.

A measure of skepticism is a good thing! There, you heard it. Asking questions is a good thing. The Church is for people like Philip who hear and believe with little or no doubts. The Church is for people like Nathanael who have questions, concerns, and doubts. The Church is for people who want to know: How did we get the Bible? Is it reliable? Did Jesus actually rise from the dead? Can miracles really happen? Are the Bible and science at odds with each other? Is Christianity any different than other world religions? Or do they teach the same things using different terms? Must Christians hold to traditional morality? What about gay marriage and other expressions of human sexuality? Cohabitation? Abortion? Birth control? Reproductive technologies? Racism? The environment? Evolution? What about terrorism and modern, religious fundamentalism? Is there meaning and purpose to life? To the universe? Does Christianity have anything significant to say about the many difficult questions being faced in the modern world? These are the kinds questions people are asking.

Dear saints, the Church is for people who have these kinds of questions. Our answers need to be first and foremost, Biblical; we must take them Jesus as He is revealed in Holy Scripture. We cannot deviate from the Bible. People may not like the answers provided but we must give them the chance to ask questions.

Philip takes a skeptical Nathanael to Jesus. And our Lord Jesus doesn't chastise Nathanael for questioning Philip or for wondering how the Messiah can come from like of Nazareth in Galilee. After meeting Jesus, Nathanael declares Jesus to be "the Son of God! You are the king of Israel!" (vs. 49). The skeptic become the believer!

Church history and tradition says that Nathanael, sometimes called Bartholomew in the other gospels, took the Gospel of Christ's death and resurrection for the salvation of the world to India and Caucasian Armenia. Tradition also says that he was skinned alive because of his faith in Jesus. Skeptical men like Nathanael don't die a death like that for a myth or fantasy. He met Jesus and it changed his life for eternity. That's the power of Christ's gospel.

Bit of a strange sermon today, I readily admit. The take home message today is two-fold. First, the Church is for all people, even the ones who have doubts and want answers to hard questions. Second, evangelism is quite simple. A friend telling a friend about Jesus. Family telling family about the Savior. Invite folks to Church. Are they skeptical? Let them come. Let them come to Jesus. And they'll hear about His word of love and forgiveness.

Come and see! We've found the Savior. His name is Jesus.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.