

Nazareth
John 1:43-51
Rev. Dan Schumacher

Several years ago the Methodist minister, Will Willimon, told this story:

“I was standing in the supermarket checkout line, madly perusing the latest *Star* magazine in an attempt to finish the article, “Vanna Says Nude Photo Is Cheap Shot” before I arrived at the cash register. The woman behind me bumped me with her cart and said, ‘Either move up in line and pay for it like everybody else, buddy, or let me by.’

I turned and said to her in an indignant tone, ‘Madam, I’ll have you know that you are addressing Vanna White’s former pastor.’ She shrieked, and then asked for my autograph. Everything came to a halt in the supermarket as people crowded around me...

Although the *Star* doesn’t report it, and you probably will not read about it in her new, long-awaited and hot autobiography, *Vanna Speaks*, it is true: I was Vanna White’s pastor. The glamorous but taciturn beauty who turns letters on *Wheel of Fortune* was a leader in my church’s youth group in North Myrtle Beach, South Carolina.

I admit that I can’t exactly detect the influence of my preaching when I watch Vanna turn her letters on *Wheel of Fortune*. About the most they let Vanna say about theology, is ‘Big money! Big money!’ But I am sure that my stamp is there, however subtly.”

Willimon goes on: “Perhaps Vanna never speaks about me because she remembers the advice I gave her. One Sunday in May of her senior year at North Myrtle Beach High, I asked, ‘Vanna, what are you planning after graduation?’ She replied, in her unfailingly sweet and sincere way, that she had always dreamed of going into modeling, so she was going to modeling school in Atlanta.

‘Vanna, no!’ I said. ‘Don’t do that! Those schools will do nothing but take your money. Nobody ever gets a job after one of those places. You have brains! Ability! You could be more than a model!’

She thanked me politely and said, ‘But I have this dream of going to Hollywood and becoming an actress.’

‘From north Myrtle Beach?’ I asked. ‘Vanna, that only happens in movies. This is crazy! I see nursing as a more appropriate career for you.’”

Then, Willimon says this: “According to the *Star*, Vanna makes more in two days of taping *Wheel of Fortune* than I make in a whole year of giving good advice to aspiring teenagers” (*Stories by Willimon*, 62-63).

Sometimes we think we *know* what's true for someone else — think we *have* the truth; then we try to *speak* that truth into their life only to find out we had no idea what we were talking about at all.

“Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” (John 1:47). That's how Jesus characterizes Nathanael. “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” It's a fascinating verse, because it's not very often that we get a description of an apostle's personality from Jesus, himself.

Synonyms for the word, *deceit*, are words like: *guile*, *cunning*, *slyness*, *wiliness*, *craftiness*, *cleverness*, *deceptiveness*, and *hypocrisy*.

Jesus was paying Nathanael a huge compliment by saying that these negative qualities were not part of his character. In this man was no craftiness, no wiliness, no hypocrisy, no saying one thing, but meaning another. Here was a man in whom there was no deceit. And it would seem that Jesus had said this about Nathanael because of Nathanael's response to Philip's good news.

Jesus found Philip first and said, “Follow me.”

Philip chased down Nathanael, his buddy from his Bible study group, and said, “Nathanael — we found him! We found the one that is written about in the scriptures, in the law and the prophets! And, are you ready for this? It's Jesus, the son of Joseph from... Nazareth” (John 1:45)

Nathanael looked at Philip as if Philip had just told him that up was down. “Nazareth? Really? Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46).

Nathanael had good reason to wonder. I mean, have you ever tried to read up on Nazareth? In preparation for this sermon, I did... and it didn't take long. That's because we don't know much at all about Nazareth in Jesus' day.

The Old Testament *never* mentions Nazareth, much less associate it with any messianic expectations. And outside of scripture, Nazareth is barely, if ever, mentioned in first century documents. The little we do know is largely speculative and wholly unremarkable.

It was a small community of probably a little over 200 people — not even big enough to have a public library. It was situated in the hill country of Galilee, a farming community that was also known for having a large population of Gentiles — which meant a high number of immigrants, foreigners, and resident aliens. There was no sign at the entrance of the town saying, “Welcome to Nazareth, home of...” then name some small-time celebrity or state champion athlete. If you wanted to go to the cineplex or Target,

you had to head over to Sepphoris, the city in the next county over. Nazareth wasn't even big enough to be a "one stoplight town."

My father-in-law who lived in a small-town in Wyoming for several years would get upset every the time city council would consider installing a stoplight at the busiest intersection. Every time it came up, he'd say, "If they put in a stoplight, I'm moving." He would have loved Nazareth. It wasn't even big enough to have a conversation about installing a stoplight.

In fact, Nazareth was so unimportant that even the HarperCollins Bible Dictionary describes it as, and I quote, "an *insignificant* agricultural village."

So Nathanael, perhaps with a bit of big-city bias, asked, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" It's one of those questions that says a whole lot more about what he already thinks than what he hopes to learn.

For some people, Nazareth and communities like it are just exits on the highway. They're undeveloped land, the boondocks, pretty pastures on the way to somewhere else — maybe even *anywhere* else.

And yet the amazing thing is, Nathanael is about to discover that something beautifully, wonderfully, salvifically good could come out of Nazareth. *Jesus* came out of Nazareth.

Jeremy Troxler says it like this: "It was in Nazareth that Jesus was raised. It was in Nazareth that he likely attended synagogue and recited Torah and learned the words of Scripture. It was in Nazareth that Scripture says Jesus 'increased in wisdom and stature and in divine and human favor...' All the rest of his life, Jesus would carry the name of his home community with him: on the lips of crowds, demons, and angels, he would be called, Jesus of Nazareth" (a sermon entitled "Nazareth," May 21, 2007).

So, there is very real sense in which the greatest gift the world has ever received, Jesus, was the gift of a small, insignificant town — the last place you'd ever expect.

But that's the thing: Jesus is always coming to us from Nazareth. He is always coming to us from the unexpected places, from the places we'd least expect.

The other day, Christen told me that she drove by a church with one of those ridiculous sayings on the church marquee. You know the kind I'm talking about — the kind that say things like, "Jesus answers 'knee'-mail." Well, this one said, "Come as you are, we'll fix you inside."

Here's the thing: I don't see a lot of people lining up at the church anymore hoping to get fixed by Jesus inside. Isn't it strange that no one is looking for Jesus in the one place you might expect to find him?

Is Jesus just not here anymore? Or is it that Jesus has never been one to be tied down by our expectations?

In my final year of college, I made a trip out to New Jersey to visit the campus of Princeton Seminary as part of my application process.

I had grown up and lived all of my life in “Small-town, USA.” I had never visited the East Coast and had definitely never tried to navigate East Coast public transportation. The school had provided instructions for how to get to the seminary from the Newark airport, but it required multiple line changes and I was immediately overwhelmed. I was suddenly a little fish in a very unfamiliar pond.

I got on the first train all right, but only because it left directly from the airport. However when it came time for my first line change, I was utterly perplexed. I stepped off of the train thinking I should be in the heart of a city, but instead was at some random platform in the middle of field. Before I could turn around and ask the engineer where the heck we were or if I was in the right place, the train doors closed and off it sped.

I started to panic. There were no smartphones back then, so there was no way to look up my location or make sure I was in the right place. All I had was an old Nokia — we called them the Nokia bricks, because you could literally throw it through a window and it would still work. So I used my “brick” to call Christen, thinking she could help me from her laptop.

So there I was, phone in one hand, pulling my suitcase in the other hand, and looking around like I was completely lost. All I needed was a heavy camera swinging from neck to complete the “I’m a lost tourist” ensemble.

And that’s when a man approached me speaking quickly: “Excuse me, sir. Excuse me. My wife is pregnant and we don’t have enough money for the next train. It will be here in just a minute. I just want to get her home. Could you loan me a couple bucks so we can get home... and maybe a little bit more for a cup of coffee? Please, sir. We just want to get home.”

I held the phone to my ear with my shoulder. I pulled out my wallet, opened it, looked inside, and showed its contents to him as I said, “All I have are twenties...” I had two twenties to be exact — all the cash I had brought with me for the entire weekend as a poor college student.

And without skipping a beat, he said, “A twenty will do.” And I was so out of sorts, I handed it to him.

And the moment I did, he turned on his heels, disappeared around the corner, walking right past the woman he’d pointed to and said was his pregnant wife and got on the train headed the opposite direction.

“What an idiot!” I thought to myself. “That guy had you pegged as a rube from the moment you stepped off the train. You were an easy mark. You didn’t even resist or put up a challenge. You literally showed that guy your wallet. And guess what? You just bought that him and his friends their first round of beers tonight... which they’ll drink while laughing about you.”

I felt like an absolute fool. Here I was a prospective student on his way to a top Ivy League school and I was just swindled out of twenty bucks by a guy who could see me coming from a mile away.

The rest of the night, all I could think about was how stupid I had been. I got to campus, got into my guest room, took a shower after the long day, ironed my clothes for my interview the next morning, and still I was just fuming about how foolish I had been.

And the anger! I was so angry at the whole situation — at the man, at myself, and most of all at New Jersey! Why did this great school have to be in such a terrible place? The righteous indignation was reverberating through me. I could feel it. So I did the only thing I knew to do. I sat down the edge of the bed in that little dorm room. I took three deep breaths. And I prayed.

“God, I feel ashamed at how dumb I was and now I’m angry. I’m angry at myself for being so naive and I’m angry at this man for conning me. But, God, if I’m going to err, let me err trying to follow Jesus. Don’t let this experience harden my heart to those who are hungry and in need. Let me err every time in an effort to be like Jesus, even if it costs me every \$20 bill I ever have.”

When I opened my eyes, a peace had come over me that I can’t explain — and with it a new perspective of the situation. In a weird, unexpected sort of way, I had come to encounter Jesus through the man that scammed me out of that \$20 bill. I’m not saying that Jesus sent that man to scam me, but I am saying that Jesus is always coming to us from “Nazareth” — from the people, places, and experiences we least expect.

It’s funny, I remember very little from the rest of that trip — the professors I met, the tour of the campus, the interview with the dean. But I still remember the face of the man who gladly took my \$20 bill, and I remember the prayer that I prayed: If I’m going to err, let me err trying to follow Jesus.

In the end, when Nathanael actually met the guy from Nazareth, his confession wasn’t, “See. I told you. Nothing good ever comes from Nazareth.” He said, “Rabbi, you are the son of God! You are the king of Israel!” (John 1:49).

Thank God for Nathanael, because through his encounter with Jesus, we are reminded that Jesus is always coming to us from the “Nazareth” places of our lives.

Amen.