

"How Do You Know Me?"

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⁴³The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.' ⁴⁴Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵Philip 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.' ⁴⁶Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.' ⁴⁷When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!' ⁴⁸Nathanael asked him, 'Where did you come to know me?' Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.' ⁴⁹Nathanael replied, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!' ⁵⁰Jesus answered, 'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.' ⁵¹And 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.' (John 1: 43-51)

The first words Jesus spoke to Nathanael were a compliment: "When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Jesus instantly proclaimed Nathanael an earnest man... an honest man... a forthright man. Jesus saw in him someone who spoke the truth and called things like he saw them. It was high praise that most of us would be honored to get.

But it kind of freaked Nathanael out.

Eugene Peterson's translation from *The Message* really highlights this aspect of the conversation. In Peterson's version, Nathanael's response to Jesus is pretty harsh. "Where did you get that idea?" Nathanael says. "You don't know me!"

I think Jesus freaked Nathanael out because he was saying something that only a good friend would know. Not many of us, when we first meet someone, would risk making such a categorical proclamation about his or her honesty or trustworthiness. We would want to get to know them first. Trust is something that is built over time. Trust happens between two people when they see each other in action, when they see responses under duress, when a person is tested by life and clearly lands on the side of telling the truth. To Nathanael, it must have felt like Jesus had not even begun to earn the right to make character judgments about him. So, there is offense in his response. "Who do you think you are? You don't know me!"

This feeling of offense, however, does not last long, because Jesus does something that he is usually reluctant to do in the gospels. Jesus uses the "crystal ball" strategy, disclosing a piece of knowledge that seems, in a word, magical. No one had been around when Nathanael was sitting under the fig tree earlier that day. No one had seen him there. There was no scientific explanation for Jesus having such intimate knowledge of where Nathanael had been and what he had been doing. With just a few words, an offended and bristly Nathanael turns into an amazed and converted Nathanael. "Rabbi, truly you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" In an instant, Nathanael accepts that he is, and has been, intimately known by Jesus.



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It is one of the deepest human needs and desires: the need to be seen and heard and recognized, to be understood, to be really and truly known by another. There is a part of us that seeks the deep comfort of knowing that, even when our lives are laid bare, even if those things that we are not so proud of are revealed, that those who have this full knowledge still choose to stay alongside of us and cherish us for who we are... not the versions of ourselves that are posted on Facebook or Instagram, but the real deal about us. I had a great conversation at a presbytery meeting this week with a woman who referred to this as “the full Monty.” She described the feeling she got in some churches where people were nice and welcoming, but you still get the sense that they are holding something back. She felt like her church had grown so much spiritually in recent years, and she said she thought it was because people had just made the decision to be real and honest with one another, but in an accepting and loving way — to give the full measure of themselves — “the full Monty” to faith. And when they did, and when they found they loved each other, they had discovered the joy and blessing of being truly known.

I expect that many of you received a handful of Christmas letters over the past month. I really look forward to reading some of them, but some of them can — how should I say this? — be a little much... the ones that say, in accolades, awards and unparalleled victories, that “Jesus may love you, but I’m clearly his favorite, and here’s why...”

Frankly, I don’t usually retain a lot of the information in those kinds of letters. But to this day I remember one that my family got when I was in college. I had come home after exams, and I was going through the Christmas cards, and I came across one sent by a family that went to our church. They had been in my life since before I could crawl, so I knew the back story well. I remembered when they had taken a foster child into their home while their own two children were very young. I remembered how this family had taken it upon themselves to love that child who had never known love, who had been assaulted in horrible ways as a very young girl. I remembered how they could not bring themselves to send her off to another family, to continue the rejection that she probably expected would come. She was constantly in and out of school during her adolescence, constantly testing her new parents to see if their love was genuine, or if it could be broken. In the midst of these challenges, their son, who had been a gifted runner, fell into a pit of drugs and alcohol during college. The family tried to support him as best they could. It was a lot to handle, but through it all, they had held fast to a faith that gave them hope in in the darkest circumstances.

And so, while I have forgotten all of the rosy, picture-perfect letters from across the years, I still remember their letter that Christmas. I’ve changed the names, but this is the actual letter:

“We have had a difficult year, but we celebrate the joys with the sorrows. Little Mary continues to make progress. She has been working part time here in town, and we are hopeful that she will earn her GED this year. She has met a nice boy who is a private in the Marine Corps. He seems to love her genuinely, and he makes her happy. We don’t know how long he’ll be stationed close by, but we are hopeful.

William has just graduated from college. It took him six years. But he has found a job he loves. He is renting a house here in town, and is standing on his own two feet. He is taking responsibility for his successes and his mistakes. He is getting married this fall, and we hope you can come and celebrate with us.”

If you didn't know this family, this might be a puzzling letter. But for those who really knew the family – for those who had walked with them and cried with them and laughed with them and watched their courage through it all — it was a message of beauty, earnestness, truth and love that most of the world misses out on much of the time. Their vulnerability and honesty – the fact that they were willing to let themselves be fully known – opened the door to a new depth and authenticity in their relationships.

Even though we can see the value of this kind of sharing, we still, at times, spend a lot of time and energy trying **not** to be known. I can think of at least two reasons that we might not give “the full Monty” in our own relationships:

1. The first is self-defense. At the base of this idea is the illusion that if we keep ourselves from being known, we might be able to control how much we are criticized, mocked, or rejected. We think that, if we remain anonymous, at least we can save ourselves from the pain of betrayal or abandonment.¹ This is especially true for anyone who has been burned before. As they say, “once bitten, twice shy.” For many, the shyness lasts a lot longer than twice.
2. Another reason we may think twice about making ourselves truly known is that we are tired. I think many of us are on overload in a lot of ways, and just the thought of taking on another project, another big effort, can be exhausting. Knowing another person, and being known by another person, takes time and effort,² and when we are thinking about investing ourselves in a large group, that work exponentially multiplies. It just seems easier to sit back and remain passive.

While these rationales for not allowing ourselves to be known are understandable, there is a high cost to this reluctance. When we work hard to remain anonymous, we virtually guarantee the result that we were trying to avoid in the first place. When we make it clear that we don't want to be in relationship with someone, that person usually picks up on this quickly and is more than happy to comply with our wishes.³ Fearing rejection, we guarantee rejection. We also become anxious, because we have walled ourselves off from that part of us that needs to be known, needs to be understood, needs to be welcomed.

Fortunately for us, the church is the perfect place to overcome these difficulties, because God has lifted us up and moved us down the track to a certain extent. God, we are assured, already knows us. Like Nathanael, we are known long before we even hear the name of Jesus for the first time. There is no way we can hide from God, no dark corner where we can avoid God's loving attention. This much is obvious in the Psalm we just read. *“O LORD, you have searched me and known me,”* the psalmist writes. *“You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.”* And lest we are led to believe this is a bad thing, the psalmist assures us otherwise. *“Yes, God knows me, and “such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.”* With God, we start from a place of being wonderfully and completely known, and it happens to us long before we even learn God's name.

¹ Paul Dunion, “To Be Known and Loved,” https://www.huffingtonpost.com/paul-dunion-edd-lpc/to-be-known-and-loved_b_6050160.html, accessed January 12, 2018.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

From this place, God invites us to come and get to know him, too. This has been the invitation from the very beginning. Scripture says that when Moses first met God at the burning bush that God revealed himself to Moses with the name “I am who I am.” But a better translation of that name may actually be “I am **who I will be.**” In other words, God says to Moses, if you really want to know me, then come with me and watch what I am about to do. That is how you will know me. You will know me by what I do for you, and with you, as we walk together.

It is the same invitation that both Philip and Jesus give to Nathanael. You want to know what good can come out of Nazareth? “Come and see.” You’re impressed that I knew you were sitting under the fig tree, Nathanael? I will show you more amazing things than this, if you come with me. Come and see who I really am.

The lessons we should take away from this moment in Nathanael’s life are twofold. The first is to be reminded, yet again, of the gospel truth that the God of heaven and earth, that Emmanuel who is God with us, knows us intimately. No matter what may exist within the inmost recesses of our lives, this same God who knows us also loves us without reservation or hesitation and offers to us an open invitation to come along with him, to join him on the path so that we might know him, too.

The second thing we learn is that this thing we call church — whatever it is that drew us here this morning — calls us all into honest and vulnerable relationship with one another. We cannot be the church if our strategy when we come here is to duck and cover and get out to lunch as fast as we can. To use my Presbyterian friend’s wording, when we gather as the church, we are supposed to bring “the full Monty.” As you look across the pews around you, and you see a person sitting near you, do you know what brings that person joy? Do you know what frightens him? Do you know what her regrets are? Are you willing to let that person know what deep sorrows you carry? Do you dare to earnestly ask, together, what more that life may be asking of you? What God may be seeking from you? If this church family were to write a good Christmas letter — a memorable Christmas letter that wasn’t fake or processed but really brought the full Monty — what would it say?

An article I once read contained a beautiful idea, an idea that speaks directly to our longing to know and be known. It said this: “God doesn't have favorites; only intimates. And anybody can be an intimate of God.”⁴ The God who has counted the very hairs on your head, who knows you as well as anyone or anything can be known, is inviting you to come and walk a while with his Son so that you might know him, too.

Amen.

⁴ Thomas R. Feller, Jr., *Faith Journeys: Devotions for Spiritual Enrichment*, p. 102.