

“Searched, Known, and Loved”

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; John 1:43-51 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might trust in your deep love for us and lean on it for the courage to live out the gospel as only we can. In Jesus' name, Amen.

It seems highly likely that you're going to get two sermons instead of one today. I would apologize for that, but I'm not sorry. They can't really be separated, so I'll just do my best to make them both half a sermon long. You see, there's the first sermon, and then there's the sermon that results from the first sermon; that's the second sermon. But if I keep talking about them like this, there will be three, so let's get started!

The first sermon is the one I was delighted to discover it was time to give, when I looked up the lectionary scriptures for this Sunday a week and a half ago. This is the story of my relationship with John 1:43-51. It's a two-part story and it begins in the summer of 1993. I was 17 and had recently graduated from high school. I was counseling Junior Camp at Camp Walter Scott outside Effingham, Illinois, the Disciples church camp I had grown up attending nine summers in a row. We were all in the dining hall, because we'd been having lunch, and I was standing by the iced tea machine, watching our Regional Youth Minister lead after-lunch singing. I always drank iced tea at camp because the water at Walter Scott was super disgusting. Bob was a great song leader and guitar player, so there wasn't much I was needed for at the

moment. I had worked with Bob, not just at camp, but in my role on the Regional youth council, so I'd had a front-row seat to his ministry. And beyond his guitar-playing ability, there was more I knew about him: Bob was super disorganized. He loved youth and he loved his work, but it was always sort of chaos. It's possible I'm exaggerating as preemptive self-defense here, but believe me when I say that administration was not Bob's spiritual gift. This is what you need to know to understand what comes next. Because what comes next is my call to ministry, and it came in a form I am not proud of. Standing there by the iced tea machine, it suddenly occurred to me that "I could do that. And I could do it better than Bob."

And that was it. There was no looking back. I was going into ministry, and I was going to be more than adequate at doing it. The specifics of what I was going to do shifted and broadened in the time between my 17th summer and my ordination 8 years later, as I realized there were so many options other than regional youth ministry. But that was the moment. It occurred to me that I should go into ministry, so I did. And it was hard to talk about. When you get to seminary, and all your peers are talking about the struggles and resistance involved in their moments of calling, it's hard to admit that your call was basically God using your own arrogance to get you to commit to something.

At some point during my field ed internship, I was discussing this embarrassing issue with my mentors. One of them asked me if it had ever occurred to me to be something else before. Yes, I replied, for a few years before that, I was convinced I

was destined to be an 8th grade English teacher, because if kids didn't get a handle on good grammar then, they were doomed to struggle the rest of their academic careers. But you didn't do that, did you, he asked. No, I didn't. So when it occurred to you that you should go into ministry, it was somehow different. Yes, but I can't explain how. It was at that point that my mentor suggested that I look into scripture to find a call story that might connect with mine, so I could reconcile with it and claim it more freely. He encouraged me to look at the gospels, rather than the Hebrew scriptures, as it was clear Isaiah's flames and winged beasts weren't really my speed. So I did. And that's when I found John 1:43-51 and Nathanael. It was such a gift.

Let me introduce you to the Nathanael I know. He's the one who responds to his friend Philip telling him they'd found the Messiah by quipping, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Because of course he did. This is Nathanael: he talks too much, he speaks before he thinks, or maybe he does think, but he says it anyway. To be blunt, he has a smart mouth, and he's gotten in trouble for it his whole life. It's not that he really thinks he's better than anybody else, it's just that funny things bubble up out of his mouth before he can stop them, and it often makes him seem like a jerk. He knows it's often a problem, and sometimes he wishes he was different, but he can't seem to change. His friends and family know this about him, and they've come to accept it, but it's still frequently annoying and they rib him about it on a regular basis. And then he goes to meet this Jesus guy – the one from Nazareth – and before he can even say hello, Jesus is giving him this huge smile and saying, "Here is

truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” And it kind of sounds like he’s poking fun, but he actually seems completely sincere, and for the first time in his life, Nathanael experiences someone loving the exact thing about him that drives everyone else nuts. Jesus means it. He has completely reframed Nathanael’s tendency to blurt out whatever comes into his head, focusing on what no one has noticed before: the fact that Nathanael can always be counted on to tell the truth. He may say it in a way that hurts your feelings, but he isn’t going to lie to you. Jesus “The truth will set you free” Christ thinks that’s a good thing, and he loves Nathanael for it.

It's a transformative moment. Nathanael doesn't really understand how he's been seen so honestly so quickly, and Jesus' explanation doesn't add much, but soon he's proclaiming more truths: “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” And Jesus just smiles and chuckles and says, “Really? That’s what impressed you? There’s a lot more in store.”

Can you imagine that moment? You meet Jesus, a bit skeptical even but secretly hoping to impress him with your strongest talents. And instead, he zeroes in on the thing you’ve struggled with your whole life and names what is good and holy about it. “You are precious and valued, just the way you are. I’m inviting you to follow me and enter into this work with me, using exactly those unique gifts that you’ve sometimes tried to hide because you couldn’t figure out to manage them.” Somewhere in the back of his mind, Nathanael must have had Psalm 139 on a loop: “O Lord, you have searched me and known me... Such knowledge is too wonderful

for me!” Can you imagine this feeling? Have you felt this feeling? Searched. Known. Loved. Fully understood and even more deeply beloved, just as you are. This is the part of Nathanael’s story that made it possible for me to reconcile with the awkwardness of my call. Rather than capriciousness, Jesus could see my immediate response to ministry “occurring” to me as a capacity for making decisions with conviction and recognizing the moment when circumstances that had been brewing for years had arrived at the moment they were intended for. Though it may remain arrogance, Jesus could use my assessment of my own organizational talents as compared to Bob’s as a way of giving me confidence in my abilities for a job that requires many different skills. And as a safeguard, it appears Jesus is never going to arrange for me to truly learn to play guitar!

Do you see what this means? This isn’t just good news for those of us who talk too much. This is for everyone. Whatever it is that you’ve always hated about yourself, Jesus can either heal it, forgive you for it, and find a way to love it just as it is. You yourself, just as you are, are precious to God. And more than precious, needed. Remember the part about “you will see greater things than these”? That’s where we have to go next.

It’s time for part two. Because whoever we are, whatever gifts Jesus is calling forth from us – the obvious ones and the ones we might have considered our weaknesses – it’s clear that we are in a moment that requires us to screw up all our courage and be as Christ-like as we’ve ever been – loudly, passionately, and with as

much conviction as we can muster. I cannot tell you what gifts of yours that will require, but for me, it means some serious truth telling. White supremacists have attacked our capital, and they've dragged the name of our God into their violent insurrection. You may have heard people talking about "Christian nationalism," a ideology that insists our country must be monolithically "Christian" as an identity rather than a faith, an identity wrapped up in nativism, White supremacy, authoritarianism, patriarchy and militarism.¹

I want to go a step further and call this ideology "Christianist" rather than "Christian" nationalism. This distinction is like the one we would make between "Islamic" referring to adherents of the Muslim faith of many stripes and "Islamist" referring to extremists who are culturally Muslim but whose actions do not reflect the true principles of Islam. "Christianist" nationalism is also merely culturally Christian. Nothing of this movement speaks of Jesus. Nothing of this movement even speaks of love. Our faith has been co-opted, and unless we speak out against this theft, our fellow Americans will not know that this isn't a common understanding of what Christianity is.

As for White supremacy, I know this is a hard nut to crack for many of you. You do not think about the world and your place in it that way. You don't like being put in a group that is destructive to the well-being of others, without any say so about

¹<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5cfea0017239e10001cd9639/t/5f5b8999bc43fd65e8d28712/1599834522206/What+Is+Christian+Nationalism+%281%29.pdf>

whether that was your intention or not. You don't like to think about how your life might have benefitted from systems that caused others harm. I get it. But none of that makes White supremacy less real, and our distaste for thinking about it can only hinder our shared capacity to root it out of the structures that shape our society.

Those of us who are White need to become like astrophysicists: we are trying to learn about something we cannot observe directly. We're swimming in it, but we can't really see it. We can only observe its effects. We must learn all we can by examining those effects so we can better understand the thing itself. And the data are in. Statistics about who is caught up in our prisons, which kids are expelled, who ends up dead at the hands of law enforcement. Statistics about the racial wealth gap and which mothers die during childbirth. Observing whose votes are suppressed before elections and declared "illegitimate" afterwards. Listening to the stories of our friends of color, really truly listening without defensiveness or rose-colored glasses. We cannot avoid the conclusion that White supremacy is real and it is deeply embedded in the structures of our nation despite the fact that it is in direct conflict with democracy.

We also cannot avoid the conclusion that it is in direct conflict with the obligations of the gospel. That is why I must insist on sharing this truth today. Not because I want to force my political agenda on you, but because our faith and more importantly thousands of God's beloved children are in peril. We cannot remain silent. The man we celebrate tomorrow, Dr. King, warned us, White Christians specifically, against moderation. We must be willing to follow Jesus radically and

without equivocation. You are searched and known and loved by God our Creator. But that's not the end. We will see greater things than these, Jesus promised. Because we're invited to use those gifts – all those particularities that make up who we are, our quirks and foibles – in the service of Christ's ministry of love, reconciliation and justice. "Come and see" says Jesus. There is work for you to do. It may seem challenging, unlikely, scary even. But Jesus believes in you, even if no one else around does. Jesus can see how fearfully and wonderfully you are made, and Jesus knows how you can fit into the work that is before us. There is work for lovers, for singers, for writers, for truth-tellers, for mourners, for reconcilers, for comforters, even for joke tellers and meme-makers, and so many more. There is a place for you. Searched, known, and beloved you. Let us move on to those greater things! Hallelujah and Amen.