

A HEALTHY SKEPTICISM

I Corinthians 6: 12-15, 19 & John 1: 43-51
January 15, 2012 Dean Feldmeyer

I regret to say that I never read the book, *The Help*. I intended to but you know how it goes: so many books, so little time. And the next thing I knew, the movie was out and so I just went to see the movie. And I loved it.

If you haven't seen it by now, you should. Rent it and watch it. It'll make you feel good. I promise. Sometimes, when I need of a little emotional boost I just bring up the trailer (preview) on the internet and watch it. It's just one of those things that make you shake your head in wonder at how silly and, at the same time, how wonderful human beings can be.

There are a lot of well-drawn characters in the movie but my favorite has got to be Minnie Jackson as played by Octavia Spencer.

Minnie is an African American maid who knows her own mind and doesn't mind expressing it, thank you very much. She is a paradox, though. She will openly defy the mean, racist behavior of her employers but she will not leave her abusive husband. She is both stern and troubled. You admire and pity her at the same times. When one character asks about Minnie, "Is she ever in a good mood?" Another character answers: "That IS her good mood."

Minnie has some of my favorite lines in the movie, one or two of which I can even repeat in church.

She is purported to make the best fried chicken in the community and she knows it. In one scene she takes a bite of a chicken leg, closes her eyes and says contemplatively: "Fried chicken just tend to make you feel better about life." Yeah, I can relate.

When she and her new employer, Celia, conspire to trick Celia's husband into thinking that she fried the chicken, Celia suggests that maybe they should burn the chicken a little to make their ruse more believable. Minnie responds, sternly: "Minnie don't burn chicken."

But my favorite line of Minnie's is one she repeats on several occasions in the film. It's really more of an utterance than a phrase or even a word, and it's the way she says it, the inflection, that gives it its meaning. The line is simply: "Mmm Hmm."

Emphasis on the "Hmm"

She says it when someone who she doesn't like and who everyone knows doesn't like her acts friendly.

She says it when someone comes up with an idea she doesn't like or isn't sure about.

She says it to express disapproval, yes, but mostly doubt and skepticism. "Mmm Hmm."

I loved the way she said that in the movie, how little it said and how much it communicated.

And I think it's sort of what Nathanael means when he says, in today's gospel lesson: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

WE HAVE FOUND HIM

The gospel story from John begins with Jesus calling Phillip to be his disciple.

Phillip is often referred to as the fifth disciple because, in lists of the 12, his name is almost always listed fifth. He was an immigrant from Greece to Palestine where he lived in the town of Bethsaida on the Sea of Galilee near Nazareth.

Most scholars believe that he knew Peter, Andrew and maybe James and John who also lived in Bethsaida and this morning's story tells us that he knew Nathanael. Being a Greek immigrant, he was fluent in Greek and introduced Jesus and the other disciples to the Greek speaking community in the region of Galilee.

Phillip is hardly mentioned at all in the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. He figures more prominently in the Gospel of John which was written for a community in Greek speaking Asia Minor, and in Acts, where the spread of the Gospel into the Greek community is an important part of the story.

In this morning's story we get our very first glimpse of him. Jesus decides to go from Judea in the south to Galilee in the north. He goes to the city of Bethsaida and he finds Phillip and says, "Follow me," and Phillip does. We usually assume that the conversation was longer than that but John has edited out all the unimportant stuff.

Phillip then takes Jesus to meet Nathanael, and here the story gets really interesting.

Nathanael is something of a mystery. He appears only in the Gospel of John but not in the synoptic gospels. The synoptic gospels all have lists of the disciples but John does not. In fact, it would be easy to infer from John, if we read his account alone, that there were more than 12 apostles. Nathanael appears only in this story and at the end of the gospel in the story that I have referred to as "The Last Brunch" where Jesus eats bread and fish on the beach with seven of his disciples after the resurrection.

Many scholars have smoothed over the mystery of Nathanael's identity by saying that it's all just a matter of name confusion and, in the synoptic gospels, he is known by the name of Bartholomew. There is nothing in the gospels themselves, however, to indicate that Nathanael and Bartholomew are the same person. I think we have to just live with the fact that there are some differences in the gospels that aren't always easy to explain and go on with the story.

So...

Phillip insists that Jesus come with him to the town of Cana to meet his friend, Nathanael. So they walk for a while and eventually they find Nathanael sitting under a fig tree. Now to you and me that simply sounds like a place reference.

We assume it's just a device to physically place Nathanael in the story and if there's a reason for sitting under that fig tree it's for the shade and that's about it, right?

Not so fast there! Let's look at that fig tree for a moment.

The fig tree was the national symbol for the nation of Israel. If they would have had flags in those days, the fig tree would have been on their flag or, at the very least, their national seal or coat of arms. It represented fertility and prosperity and growth.

The primitive fig tree also grew something like the willow grows in this country, with long branches that arch up and then bend down to the ground creating a sort of dome around the trunk. Fig trees were like naturally occurring gazebos in ancient Israel. They provided shade and privacy and allowed the breeze to get through.

Teachers taught under fig trees. People went under fig trees to pray, study, and to take afternoon siestas in the heat of the day when it was too hot even to be indoors.

So when we learn that Nathanael was sitting under a fig tree that's a phrase full of symbolic meaning and significance at least some of which we should pay attention to as we unpack the meaning of this story. There was, after all, only so much space on the scroll. When the writers of these stories wrote them down they chose very carefully what they were going to say and how they were going to say it. We should be no less careful in our reading of it, right?

So Phillip comes running up to Nathanael and he says, "Nathanael, we have found him. The one that Moses and the prophets wrote about. (The Messiah!) And his name is Jesus son of Joseph and he comes from Nazareth."

Nathanael, hearing Phillip coming, emerges from under the fig tree and listens to Phillip prattle on. And then he looks Jesus up and down and slowly turns back to Phillip and says...." Mmm Hmm."

How many times, we wonder, has Nathanael heard this from Phillip? We've found the Messiah! We've found the Messiah! Every time he hears a charismatic speaker, or sees someone do something amazing, or hears a message that gives him goose bumps, Phillip thinks he's found the Messiah. And, no doubt, his naivety, his gullibility, his eagerness and willingness to believe every "messiah" who comes down the pike, has allowed Phillip to be taken advantage of.

So Nathanael, protective of his friend, and of his own purse, is skeptical. He looks Jesus over, assumes he's just another grifter, a con-man, taking advantage of poor, gullible Phillip, and he says... Mmm Hmm.

"Nazareth, huh? What good thing ever came out of Nazareth?"

Phillip responds not with an argument or an explanation but with an invitation: "Come and see."

Something to be learned, there, huh?

What is it with us that we 21st century Christians think that we have to explain and convince people into the faith. We are constantly wanting to make "the case for Jesus" and "the case for God." We want to pile up enough rational, logical arguments that non-believers will be so overwhelmed with our rhetorical powers that they will have no choice but to surrender and become Christians.

But that is now how it happens, is it? People don't become Christians because they were convinced and persuaded by superior argumentation. They become Christians because they were loved. Because they saw lives changed and souls renewed. People come to the church not because we have the best debaters in town but because we have the best friends, the best helpers, the best relationships in town.

The most persuasive argument Christianity makes is the lives of Christians and the love of the Christian community. And the only way people ever see, experience and come to know that is that someone said to them, as Phillip said to Nathanael, "Come and see."

A MAN IN WHOM NOTHING IS HIDDEN

Jesus is not put off by Nathanael's evaluative look. As Nathanael looks him over, no doubt with one eyebrow arched skeptically, Jesus just smiles back at him and then gives his own evaluation of Nathanael. Scholars tell us the translation can be tricky, but let's give it a try.

"Here is a true Israelite in which there is no deceit." That last word is the tricky part. Other translators render it as "guile," "duplicity," "nothing false," and my favorite, "nothing hidden." It's a play on words, you see. A sort of pun. Nathanael was hidden under the fig tree and then he came out to confront Jesus. Jesus remarks that he is a man in whom nothing is hidden. The essence of Jesus' words seems to be that Nathanael is one of those guys who is up front about everything. He says what's on his mind without reservation. He's forthright; he's honest to a fault.

Nathanael does not deny Jesus' evaluation of him but he does want to know how Jesus knows this about him when they have just met. Did Phillip tell him? Has his reputation preceded him in some way?

Jesus answers, "I saw you under the fig tree." I saw you, in other words, when you were hidden. I saw you when no one else could see you. As my old seminary professor Bogey Dunn used to say, "When Jesus sees somethin', look out. Because we ain't just talkin' about eyeballs, here."

Like Phillip, Jesus does not chastise or criticize or rebuke Nathanael for his skepticism. Did you notice that? A reasonable, honest skepticism is just fine with Jesus. He can handle it. There is even something like admiration in his assessment of Nathanael.

Here is a man in whom there is nothing hidden. What you see and hear is what you get with Nathanael. He's a skeptic, true. But he's not a cynic. He doesn't dismiss or refuse to believe just to be contrary or because of some hidden

personal agenda. His is an honest and open skepticism and he is open to correction. If you can prove your claims he is willing to believe you.

And he does.

When Jesus says that he “saw” Nathanael when he was hidden from view under the fig tree, Nathanael responds, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God, the King of Israel!” (Exclamation point!)

Scholars have long wondered and debated what exactly happened between verses 48 and 49, here. What is it that makes Nathanael so quickly give up his skepticism? Was Nathanael not really all that skeptical? Was he ready to give it up and this just gave him an opportunity? Or was there something in Jesus’ gaze, in his demeanor that convinced Nathanael? Or does John leave some critical piece out of the account?

Even Jesus seems a little surprised by Nathanael’s sudden change of attitude. Look at his response:

“Really?” He seems to say. “That’s it? You believe me just because I told you I saw you under a fig tree?”

Then he takes it to the next level: “Because, son, this is nothing. You’re going to see some pretty amazing things before too long. In fact, you are about to be confronted with a paradigm shift, a game changer that is going to transform how you experience God and life and everything.”

The Good News and the one who brings it is not just a cool story, you see. It’s not just a model that we hold up in front of us knowing that none of us can really live up to it so why bother trying. It’s a game changer, a thing that, if you take it seriously, really take it seriously, it will change your whole life.

A HEALTHY SKEPTICISM

In my thirty years of ministry I have heard lots of people making lots of religious claims. I hear lots of Phillips who think they have found the latest messiah. They want to share their miracle stories and their answered-prayer stories and their visions and the voices they have heard and the dreams they have had and what it all means for them and for me and for the church. Lots of stories.

And I hope I don’t shock or dismay you when I share with you that I am, like most ministers I know, a skeptic. I’m kind of like Nathanael in this story. It’s not that I don’t believe the stories and the claims that people make for their religion and their world view, it’s just that I’m slow to swallow them wholesale. I want to test those claims.

And, being a Methodist, I stand in good company. John Wesley, our founder, believed that experiences which make claims of religious significance should not be taken on their face. Anything which makes a claim on our faith, he said, should be strong enough to withstand a test. In fact, those things should be strong enough to withstand four tests.

Scripture.

Tradition.

Reason.

Experience.

Scholars who have made the study of Wesley and his theology their life’s work have called this the “Wesley Quadra-lateral.” A four sided figure or structure wherein each side is supported by the other three.

Any story, any claim, any notion, any event, any dream, or idea, or experience, indeed, even scripture itself can and should be put to this fourfold test before we accept it as instructive and normative for the Christian life:

If it makes a claim on our faith life, we should test it against TRADITION (How has the church historically interpreted it?).

We should test it against SCRIPTURE (Is it consistent with the claims of the gospel?).

We should test it with REASON (Is this consistent with the theology we espouse and other claims that it makes?).

And we should test it by our own EXPERIENCE (Is it consistent with the rest of my faith experience?).

This is the way of Nathanael, the way of the honest, healthy skeptic.

And the promise of Jesus is that, if we abide by it, we will see “heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

And now wouldn’t that be something?

AMEN