

“Really? Me?” “Yeah, you.”

A Sermon for the Members and Friends of Millburn Congregational UCC

John 1:43-51 (The Message)

Second Sunday after Epiphany, Year B

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How well do you see yourself? How well do you know yourself? Can you see yourself objectively, as you really are? Do you know the real you, in all of your complexity? You can get really philosophical about questions like this. There’s a whole school of thought that says there is no such thing as the real, objective you. You are who you are to you, and you are who you are to others. You can get really philosophical about such things, and believe me - people do. I used to. I long for the days when I had the time to do so!

But one thing is clear: we often fail to see ourselves well, or adequately. We’re conditioned to think and feel about ourselves in certain ways. That can cloud our vision. What I’m thinking about today particularly is how we often fail to appreciate good and positive and redeeming things about ourselves. Sometimes negative self-perceptions can eclipse the light that others see radiating from us. In that case we need help. To really understand ourselves well, as well as we can understand ourselves, it’s necessary to be in relationship with others. Our loved ones and friends, and even perfect strangers, can sometimes see in us things that we honestly, genuinely do not see.

“Really? Me?” “Yeah, you. Isn’t that obvious about you?” “No.”

For this, what John Lennon wrote is true: we all need ‘a little help from our friends.’ And we need to offer a little help to our friends.

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There’s a guy, Nathanael, mentioned in our text from John’s Gospel. He appears only in John’s Gospel. We’re not sure which, but we think he becomes one of the disciples we read about in the other Gospels – he may well have been Bartholomew. Anyway, for now he’s just a guy, and he’s just been approached by his friend Philip. He seems a little smug; Philip’s telling him something about a Jesus of Nazareth, about whom Nathanael seems to harbor some skepticism. He says, "Nazareth? You've *got* to be kidding." Nazareth is po-dunk. (By the way, he reminds me of some folks I know from Chicago. God love ‘em, but some of them have a real contempt for those of us who aren’t from Chicago. They’re the ones who remind us that when we’re on vacation in California and someone asks us where we’re from, we’re not to say, ‘From Chicago,’ because we’re *not*. I asked one of them, ‘If this isn’t Chicago, what is it?’ He said, ‘There are cornfields up here - this is *Wisconsin*.’ See, being from Nazareth was like being from *Wisconsin* – you’ve *got* to be kidding – what good could possibly come of *that*?)

Well, what came of that was a new life for Nathanael. This is the moment he’s called to discipleship. It’s interesting that Jesus never asks him to follow (did anyone notice that?). There’s neither invitation nor command. Instead, Jesus simply shares something that he noticed about Nathanael when he saw him once before. When Jesus sees Nathanael coming he says, "There's a real Israelite, not a false bone in his body." Nathanael says, "Where did you get that idea? You don't know me." Jesus answers, "One day, long before Philip called you here, I saw you under the fig tree." Nathanael exclaims, "Rabbi! You are the Son of God, the King of Israel!"

So it all starts with Jesus seeing something in Nathaniel, something that Nathaniel did not see himself, and very importantly, with Jesus taking the risk to share that with Nathaniel. He might have kept it to himself. But then there would have been no transformative experience, and a part of the divine plan for Jesus' ministry would have gone unfulfilled. For Nathanael, a truth about himself has been revealed. Jesus sees potential in this young man – character, integrity – and when Jesus shares that, a bond is instantly formed, a new community is instantly forged.

“Really? *Me?*” “Yeah, you. Isn't that obvious about you?” “*No.*”

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My home church, which held me 'in-care' during my journey through seminary, is First Congregational UCC in Madison, which is on the UW campus. Some time after I started the process another member of that church got going down a similar path. His name is Jerry Hancock. He was older than me, already in his fifties. By this time he had enjoyed a long and prosperous career as an attorney, most of it as a prosecutor. But now he was shifting gears, and he knew exactly what he wanted to do. He wanted to start up a prison ministry, one that would speak with a progressive Christian voice (they don't all speak with that voice, by the way). So he enrolled at Chicago Theological Seminary. I remember that, but then I guess I kind of forgot about Jerry and his quest.

But after Christmas we were in Madison for a little getaway and my wife picked up a copy of a local weekly. On the cover, there he was: Jerry Hancock. The caption reads: “Holy Redeemer: Jerry Hancock once worked to enforce the law. Now he's out to change the system, one criminal at a time.”

There are two purposes to Jerry's prison ministry. One is to point out the injustices of the prison system in the United States and to lend a religious voice to the prison reform movement. He says, “You can't go inside the walls and see and hear what we do and remain silent.” So the ministry is partly prophetic. But it's also about being a pastor to the offenders. One of the people in his care is a guy named William Payne, who's an inmate at the Columbia Correctional Institution in Portage. He graduated from Jerry's program on restorative justice, which brings offenders and victims together and helps offenders understand the harm they have done to victims. He says that Jerry “showed me a new way to live my life...changed me for the better. He made you come face to face with your problems. You cannot b.s. him...(Jerry) “showed me how to give back, talk to people that could be going down the same road I did and help them not to.”

Jerry says, “it offers a sense of hope even inside a maximum security prison because it shows inmates that they can live a life of integrity within their own community and, hopefully, outside the walls.”

These are criminal offenders, learning how to give back and live lives of integrity. I spent some time in criminal justice myself, enough to know that, in general, offenders don't see themselves as people of integrity, or as people capable of contributing to the community. That eludes most of them. They don't see that in themselves. They don't see their potential, because their self-perceptions are so clouded by their whacked-out backgrounds. They need someone to bring that out in them, by first pointing out the possibility. Jerry Hancock sees untapped potential in their lives; he sees them as children of God who are capable of so much more than they have shown so far. And he knows that when you see that, you have to speak up, because probably no one else will.

“A person of *integrity*? Really? *Me?*” “Yeah, you. Isn't that obvious about you?” “*No.*”

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“Know thyself,” they say. Self-knowledge is associated with wisdom. But it only goes so far. It only extends to those things about ourselves that we can see. Other things, oftentimes good things, we can’t see. We need others to point them out for us.

Jesus saw something in Nathanael, and dared to share his insight with him. The result was a new disciple for Jesus, a player in Jesus’ ministry which was all about lighting up the darkness with hope. In the same way, Jerry Hancock sees things in criminal offenders (who everyone else avoids or condemns), and he dares to share those insights with them. The result is often someone who leaves behind a screwed up and pointless and purposeless life, and takes up Jesus’ cross. The important point is that somebody has to care enough to share what they see – to get out of their comfort zones and speak the word that desperately needs to be spoken.

We’re all being challenged here, I think. We shouldn’t assume that others will find ‘the way’ for themselves. They might not. The biblical record suggests that ordinarily we don’t find ‘the way’ ourselves. ‘The way’ to God and ‘the way’ to our true selves are usually through others. It tends to happen in community. We’re not private people, living unto ourselves, no matter how we might like to think of ourselves. Our lives have all been shaped by others, and we are called to shape the lives of others, too, for good.

We’re all intuitive enough to see good things in others, things that maybe they don’t see themselves. But unfortunately what tends to happen in our detached middle class way is that we choose not to share. “I don’t want to interfere in someone else’s life.” “I don’t want to impose my stuff on them.” How tragic. We’re depriving others of insights that might help clear up their clouded self-perceptions.

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I accompanied our youth on their mission trip to Rosebud Reservation a couple years ago. There was a kid in our group from another church who was, shall we say, a bit of a challenge. For most of the week the most charitable thing you could have said about that kid is that he was a punk. Calling him that would be charitable and generous. I saw a lot of inappropriate behaviors and gestures; I heard a lot of inappropriate language. He was a *punk*. Everything he did was intended to draw attention to himself. He didn’t take the group activities seriously and he considered the work projects in the community a joke. He did next to nothing.

But then, for the second part of the week, the kids worked with small children in a community center. I and some others were surprised to see how different the punk was in this environment. The little kids were all over him – more so, I think, than any of the others. I was surprised, but I was also fascinated, and I sort of watched it unfold through the corner of one eye. It was obvious that he was a natural with little kids, who seemed to like and trust him. And he was having a great time with them. I came up to him as we were preparing to leave the center and said, “Wow, you really have a way with kids. Maybe that’s something to think about for a career?” I just threw it out there. I remember him staring at me silently, as though that had triggered some deep thought. I wondered, “Is he putting me on?” I don’t think so.

I think it was more like, “Really? *Me?*” “Yeah, you. Isn’t that obvious about you?” “*No.*” Amen.