

## A Story of Discipleship

by

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As a seminary student at the Pacific School of Religion – located in Berkeley – I am now officially in the middle of my seminary Education. Every seminary student at the school is required to pass what is called “A Middler” or in other words, an appointed time during the middle of their education when students meet with a few faculty members and students peers to discuss their sense of calla and belief. Part of the “middler” is to write and present a very lengthy paper on a host of theological topics, ranging from our thoughts on the nature of the Holy Spirit to Christian Community. In the paper we are to write about not only what we believe to be true, but **how we know what we believe is true**. A very challenging task, I think.

For centuries, philosophers have asked questions about knowledge and truth. How do we know what is true? How do we decide what is real and true and right in our lives? Everyday we are bombarded with new information that demands for us to make a decision on whether or not we think that this new piece of (news/info) is

true or false, right or wrong. When I watch TV, I watch advertisements that call for me to make a judgment about whether particular brands are better than the other. I am called to come to some kind of decision. The information we are called to process and the decisions we must make in our lives easily becomes more substantial than mere TV advertisements. Yesterday I read in a news report that “Washington was making it clear that a case for war (with Iraq) was already developing.” – Should I believe there is a case for war? How do I know? There are many other serious questions we are called to consider and reflect upon – many of us, for example, may be wondering what to believe about the church, and what to believe about God. In the process of making those decisions – a fair amount of doubt or skepticism can easily arise. The notion of doubting or being a skeptic often has a negative connotation, but I am referring to a healthy process in which our attitude is questioning, and even cautious to affirm.

It is no wonder, really, that doubt readily comes to the forefront of our mind as we try to decide about how we feel about something, especially when we begin to recognize the natural ability of the human mind to kid itself, making things appear to be true when they are not, and vice-versa. We know of optical illusions; we know that sounds can fool us, that we can be misled by our senses; we know that the sun appears to rise and set, but we know better. It begins to look doubtful whether we

can distinguish between the real and unreal. When you come right down to it, we are faced with this very same problem all through our lives. How do we know what is real?

18<sup>th</sup> Century Scientist and Theologian Emanuel Swedenborg valued human freedom and insisted that if that freedom was to have any meaning at all, it must include the freedom to call evil good and good evil. As George Dole, a minister in our church put it, “The free mind must be free to err; or, in more personal terms, the only truth that is fully accepted is the truth that is freely chosen.”

It is indeed required of us to use our mind to discern as best we can the fact from the fiction. And an important and essential aspect of discerning is doubting.

In our story from the first chapter of the Gospel of John, I think Nathanael is asking this very same question – How do I decide what is right or wrong to believe? – with this same sense of doubting. In the story, Jesus is just beginning his ministry, and is in the process of gathering disciples. First, Andrew and his brother Simon Peter were called. Next, were Philip and Nathanael. Jesus finds Philip first, and it is Philip who seeks out Nathanael. Philip says to him, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law and about whom the prophets

also wrote – Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of Joseph.” Nathanael questions the news he hears, he is not ready to accept the good news without wondering, without doubting.

We find differences in the four Gospels in respect to the story of Jesus calling his disciples, but with every case except Nathanael, as far as I can find, when the call for discipleship goes forth, at once, it is followed by the response of obedience. In the Gospel of Matthew, when we read about Andrew and Simon Peter, they are casting a net into the sea – for they were fisherman. The Lord, who is walking by, says to them, “Follow me...” and we read that **immediately**, they leave their nets and follow him. The Lord passes by James and his brother John, who are in their boat with their father. The call goes forth, and we read that they too **immediately** leave the boat and their father, and follow him. Later, we read that as the Lord is walking along, he sees Matthew sitting at the tax booth, he says to him, “Follow me.” And Matthew gets up and follows him.

In our story from John, Philip too is ready to follow – only first, he must tell Nathanael. Nathanael is not ready to answer with the same response – instead he questions, even doubts the news he has just heard from Philip. Before he is ready to believe, he asks two questions. First, he responds by asking this question –

“Nazareth? Can anything good come from there?” One can hardly hear his question without hearing the doubt that must have been in his voice. Historians and Archaeologists believe that at the time of Jesus, Nazareth would have been but a small village, with perhaps 25 families living within its boundaries. The village of Nazareth, only 60 miles north of Jerusalem, was in fact very isolated, with no trade routes running through it. From what we learn of Nathanael, it is believed that he would have grown up only a few miles outside of Nazareth. It was with this in mind that Nathanael was so incredulous that something so great as the Messiah, was to come from something so small, familiar, and close by.

After Nathanael posed this question, Philip answered him by saying, “Come and see.” Nathanael agreed and as he approached Jesus, Jesus said to him, “Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false.” It is in response to this statement, that Nathanael asks his second question. He says to the Lord, “How do you know me?”

Nathanael is most satisfied with Jesus’ answer. Jesus responds, “I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you.” Perhaps in Nathanael’s mind, Jesus had shown a knowledge of things that made him out to be a miracle worker. Nathanael is now a believer, and he says to Jesus, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God, you are the King of Israel.”

If we were to think of each of the disciples as representing different aspects of ourselves, I think it would be safe to say that Nathanael represents that part of us that desires the truth, but also carries with it a fair amount of skepticism. And we need that skepticism in our life – we need to have the courage to ask questions before we bring something to our life, asking questions is a part of discipleship. Even if it means asking questions of the Divine. Swedenborg, in his work, *Arcana Coelestia*, made this statement:

“No one should be instantly persuaded about the truth – that is, the truth should not be instantly so confirmed that there is no doubt left. The reason is that truth inculcated in this way is “second-hand” truth – it has no stretch and no give.... This is why, as soon as something true is presented by open experience to good spirits in the other life, something opposite is presented soon thereafter, which creates a doubt. So they are enabled to think and ponder whether it is true and to gather reasons and thereby lead the truth into their minds rationally.” Swedenborg *Arcana Coelestia* 7298:2.

The love of truth should be accompanied with the fear of error. This comes somewhat naturally to us, I think, because it happens that with many of us, the

mind does not at once accept and confirm the offered truth. Hasty and unquestioning reception and confession of the truth is likely to result in persuasive rather than in rational faith, and however sincere that faith may be, it is liable to be easily shaken. When Philip responded to Nathanael first question by saying, “Come and See” It was as though he was saying, Approach Jesus yourself, and use that faculty which God has given you for discerning the truth, and you will see that it is beneficial.

Throughout life, we will always be called to make decisions about what we believe and why. I think what Nathanael calls for us to remember, is that there is a healthy as well as a diseased skepticism – in other words, we can have a state of doubt that leads to faith, or a state of doubt that ends in betrayal. Nathanael possessed a state of doubt that led to faith. When he was offered the opportunity to meet the Messiah, although he questioned, he did not shut out the possibility of it being true. He was willing to be convinced, but did not at once yield to the evidence of the truth. This was the process through which Nathanael entered into faith.

Healthy and diseased skepticism. Healthy skepticism can lead us into faith, and a diseased skepticism can keep us from faith – faith in God, faith in humanity. It was just this kind of skepticism that Martin Luther King was working towards

healing in his own ministry and life – a life we are called upon to remember this very weekend.

Earlier I had told you that I was called upon to write a paper on what I believe, and how I know I believe it. I would like to think that in my own life, when I have to decide that something is True – I ask two questions. First, does it help me to love the neighbor more? And, second, does it help me to love the Lord more? These are the questions that help me decide. Nathanael had his own set of questions. If you would take just one thing from this message with you this week, I would like it to be this - a question:

Ask yourself, how do you decide what is real and true and right in your lives – and are you prepared, as Nathanael was, to let truth be more powerful than what you might have considered true in the past – as was with the case with Nathanael and his ideas about Nazareth.

I would like to close by rereading Proverbs 3: 21 “preserve sound judgment and discernment, do not let them out of your sight; they will be life for you.” Amen.