**SERMON John 1:35-51**

My generation, growing up in Northern Ireland in the late 80s and 90s, were called ‘ceasefire babies.’ A name that suggested that, by the time we came around, *The Troubles* were done with, and that peace had arrived. This, of course, was an over-simplification of the whole situation. And even as the Good Friday Agreement was being celebrated on TV by MPs in London, the reality of distrust and prejudice between people and communities, because of their religious identities and political affiliations, persisted. Calling us ‘ceasefire babies’ assumed that the patterns of life that were learned and established amidst conflict, somehow no longer had power over us.

But there were still soldiers on the country roads along the Irish Border where I grew up. I remember them –in uniforms and maroon berets, at checkpoints and barracks only 6 miles from my home. We crossed through concrete bollards and between lines of soldiers regularly, to get into the Republic of Ireland where my grandparents, aunts and uncles lived. The journey, though only 25 or 30 miles, seemed to transport us into a completely different world. At *my* home, helicopters and chinooks would land in my father’s fields, particularly the meadow closest to our backdoor. He would grumble about how the troops would jump out and trample down the growing grass and cut the barbed-wire fences and pull the hinges off posts while clabbering over gates. My mother, a native of the Republic though Protestant, would serve British Soldiers tea and traybakes in the back yard, and would get the run-down about where these young Englishmen called home.

I was a Protestant child growing up in a divided Ireland. Before I was in double digits, I knew the words ‘sectarianism,’ ‘dissident,’ and ‘paramilitary.’ My status as a Protestant determined much of what would happen in my life. I would be expected to live in certain towns or certain parts of towns, attend certain schools, shop in particular stores, read particular newspapers, play certain sports, and learn specific music, languages and a version of history that was very different from a Catholic child living a few miles down the road. We learned that we were distinct from one another. We were different. And that unspoken, often unintentional lesson, deeply shaped my life and impacted my faith journey as a teenager.

So, when last week Lori posed the question, “Where are you from?” it really sent me back 30 years to contemplate the place and circumstances from which I came. It led me to realize that although I have changed a lot over the years, the lessons I had learned growing up *where* and *when* I did, were deeply embedded in me. I have been shaped in ways that to this day I am wrestling with. Shaped by the politics of the time, the communities I call home, the people that I spent time with, and the education I received – and all these factors shape me still. I *still* find myself learning, and needing to unlearn, and relearn the lessons of where I am from. It was as a ‘ceasefire baby’ I learned how to…

…distrust politics and expect dissatisfaction in civic engagement

…judge the faith of others, particularly Catholics

…have an aversion to firearms, and the military

…hate war and to be skeptical of any claim to peace

…question the stories we tell about our history

…compartmentalize the personal, from the political, from the religious

…be ashamed of my own reluctance to step out of my clan

I continue to learn how my origins have shaped me today. And your origins have shaped you too. In beautiful and life-giving ways…but, like me, in ways that are also life-limiting. Embedded within each of us are complex patterns of prejudices and judgment that affect not just ourselves, but others as well. And they certainly affect our faith? Our ability to see God at work in a complicated, messy world? Our capacity for understanding the ‘Other’?

This is not news! So, I ask again this week, where are you from? Where did you start out? What has shaped you? What continues to influence you today? And let’s expanded our vision beyond geography, to also take survey of our worldviews, our attitudes, and our perspectives.

In our scripture this week, we move from the ancient narrative of our origins into the New Testament, to the Gospel of John and, specifically I want to focus on the character of Nathanael, whose learned patterns of prejudice and judgment prevented him from seeing what was directly in front of him.

We jump into the first chapter of John, verse 35 into what struck me this week as a comic scene. John the Baptizer is standing with two of his student-followers, when he almost impulsively identifies Jesus as he walks by, “Look, here is the Lamb of God” (NRSV), or as we read in The Message, “Here he is, God’s Passover Lamb” (MSG). This prompts the student-followers to start after Jesus, who eventually turns around to find that his solo walk has been gatecrashed by two curious young men. They call out to Jesus, addressing him as ‘Rabbi,’ a title that they drop in favor of ‘Messiah’ later on. Their curiosity was rewarded with insight. Their humility paved the way for transformation. Their openness allowed a relationship to develop, and they were able to see the true identity of Jesus.

Now we are not given much of any background to these disciples of John the Baptist, but they were in a state of readiness. Readiness to learn, readiness to entertain new information, new possibilities, new truths, no matter what the impact on their lives. And unlike the other gospel accounts of the first disciples, these guys didn’t just give up their vocations as fishermen, but their religious affiliation…from John to Jesus.

In verse 43 Jesus, goes from being the one pursued by others, to initiating his interaction with Philip, who in turn reaches out to Nathanael. And in contrast to his peers before him, rather than immediately going with Philip and seeing for himself who this Jesus was, and what he had to offer. His knee-jerk reaction was of skepticism. And not just skepticism…hint of derision, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (NRSV), or as The Message renders it, “Nazareth? You’ve got to be kidding.”

Now this rings true to me! Making snap judgements, drawing premature conclusions, thinking you have the whole situation, even the whole person sized up before you spend any meaningful time asking questions or exploring curiosity. For a ‘ceasefire baby’ these kind of reactions were coping mechanisms, survival strategies, and sometimes ways of avoiding interacting with folks you didn’t know or barely understood.

But such tendencies halt curiosity. They close us up, shut us down and stifle connection. I remember in my early teens, before the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 and before the official ceasefire, attending a youth weekend at a local Outdoor Pursuits and Learning Center called Gortatole. It was located on the county line in the south of the county, right on the Irish Border. We Protestant kids were there with an equal number of kids from surrounding Catholic schools. I must have been only 13 or 14, and I remember loving the canoeing, abseiling, spelunking, and orienteering activities all weekend. What I don’t remember is learning the names of any of the Catholic kids there, or where they went to school, or worshiped or what music liked or sports they played. Instead, I remember feeling a palpable sense of difference or tension in the air. Stereotype and rumors clouded my judgment and provided an ample deterrent for engagement. It’s hard to explain, and it seems kind of ridiculous now. Nobody ever explicitly taught me to judge, to distrust, or to fear another kid my age. But my ‘way of being’ in the world was learned and well-rehearsed. Distrust was second nature.

But just like Nathanael, whose skepticism prevented him from seeing what was right in front of him, my posture of judgment rather than curiosity, and guardedness rather than openness, really prevented me for fully engaging with other kids that weekend.

Those lessons would slowly have to be *un*learned, sometimes painfully, over time. I remember so clearly, during my gap year with the Methodist Church in Ireland at the age of 17-18, really coming to terms with the knowledge that a Catholic could be a Christian, what I would have called at the time a ‘born again, getting-into-heaven’ Christian. It was a seismic shift in my thinking, but I felt the foundations of my faith being whipped out from under me. I hear the echo of Nathanael’s skepticism in my own thinking, “Catholics? You’ve got to be kidding!”

But I find hope in our passage today, for what happens next is remarkable. We see Jesus meeting Nathanael’s skepticism not with anger or argument or by backing away, but with an invitation. The very same invitation that was extended to the others. “Come and See.” “Come and see,” it’s as if Jesus’ omniscience, that divine ability to see and know all things, allowed him to see more about Nathanael than his whereabouts under a fig tree a few days previous.

If was as if he was saying:

Nathanael you have learned judgment but…

Come and see, how to unlearn judgment and relearn curiosity.

Come and see, how to unlearn prejudice and relearn compassion.

Come and see, how to unlearn guardedness and relearn openness.

Come and see, how to unlearn arrogance and relearn humility.

Nathanael, clearly, your opinions and views of Nazareth have been shaped by your context, they have become embedded in your worldview, but they are preventing you from seeing what God has in store today. Come and see a different way.

This is the pattern of the gospel. To Learn. Unlearn. Relearn. This is the pattern of transformation…and is next to miraculous for many of us. But just like our contemporary reading reminded us, curiosity and humility are necessary, for those who truly seek God and God’s will here on earth. For, not only will other people prove our prejudices and snap-judgments wrong, God will too. Sarah Bessey says, “Every time I think I have it figured out –this is how God acts, this is who God is, this is what God will do, this is what God expects– that reorienting, bracing, dangerous Love becomes an unbecomes again. And so I have been made and remade and unmade over and over again in response to the Ancient One.”

I think what we witness in the gospel story today in the unmaking and remaking of Nathanael. And it’s the pattern of transformation that God continues to work in us today. Because as passage demonstrates, God calls people in many different ways and from many different circumstances, but the invitation is the same, “Come and See.” Come and see the good that can come out of obscure and unexpected places. Come and see the good that can come out of desperate situations. Come and see the good that God can work in and through your life. Come and see strength in vulnerability, courage in unlearning and the joy of -not just witnessing- but participating in the greater things that Jesus promises Nathanael over 2000 years ago.

So, the question before us again this week is, “Where are you from?” What have you learned? What do you need to unlearn? This journey will be uncomfortable. It won’t necessarily be straightforward or take a linear path. It will require openness and curiosity. It will require us to interrogate why we think and do certain things? Why we behave or react in certain ways? It is a pattern of learning. Unlearning, and Relearning.

This is the pattern of the gospel; this is transformation, and it will impact more than just yourself. It is the way to fundamentally reorient your posture towards the world and others. So, don’t let learned patterns of prejudice and judgment prevent you from seeing and recognizing the presence of God in your life, for greater things are promised to you as you follow the example of the Christ even today. Greater things are promised you as you learn to love others the way Christ loved others. Greater things are promised to you as your heart breaks for that which God’s heart breaks. Greater things are promised to us, as a community of faith seeking to locate ourselves and our purpose in God’s plan. Take ownership over this promise today, as you unlearn the life-limiting patterns embedded with you and relearn the life-giving patterns of Christ. This is you calling…Come and see!

Amen.