

## “First Impressions”

John 1:43-51 – January 18, 2009

INTRO: Last week, we celebrated Jesus’ baptism which launched his public ministry. That ministry began by Jesus calling his disciples. Our reading today is the Gospel of John’s version of how those first disciples were recruited. It’s the one place we hear specifically about a disciple named Nathanael.

A number of years ago, I had the opportunity to join a travel group from Kirkridge, PA, for a trip to Iona, Scotland. Waiting for the plane to take off, I was relaxing and looking forward to a quiet retreat. I didn’t know any of the other people on the list they’d sent ahead of time, and that was just fine with me. I was reading a travel guide about Scotland, when I was approached by a very animated woman who had lots of questions. “Where was I going? Could I by chance be traveling with a group from Kirkridge? Had I been to Scotland before?” and on and on. You guessed it—this woman of many words and I were signed up for the same trip—the one I had hoped would be a meditative one. I soon found out she was from Minnesota, and I was worried she would find me once I got back home in Wisconsin!

My first impression of Mary was that she was someone who would never run out of something to say. And yes, she did have plenty to say, for the two weeks we were together. But I learned there was much more to her, than her never ending conversational skills. She was returning to Scotland to relax for a couple weeks, before coming back to the states, to serve 6 months in jail. Mary, along with others had gone to the School of the Americas to demonstrate against the practice of our country training soldiers from other countries, who will go back to their countries and fight their own people, especially Latin American countries. She had gotten arrested for demonstrating for peace. My first impression certainly didn’t give me the whole picture.

Abdul El-Sayed is the son of Egyptian immigrants, who was raised in a swanky Detroit suburb. A devout Muslim, he used to flatten his opponents on the football field. He is now a Rhodes Scholar, heading off to Oxford University in England, next fall, where he is going to study medicine. Abdul says that before 9-11, he was just a darkly pigmented guy with a funny name. After that, things changed and people judged him differently. He remembers a high school football game his senior year, when three opponents knocked him down and one yelled, “Get the \_\_\_\_\_ out of our country.” While playing lacrosse for the University of Michigan, one opponent shouted at him, “I didn’t know they played lacrosse in the Middle East.” First impressions of Abdul don’t give the whole picture of him as a person. (*Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 1/16/09)

Dawn Goldsmith grew up in an all-white farming community in the Midwest. Her family was always thankful that they were safe from the violence that plagued large cities. Things changed for her “when she started working at a bank in a larger community nearby. The branch, located in a poor neighborhood, stayed open late on Fridays and sometimes it was after dark when she drove home. Police had dealt with some small riots in this neighborhood. Her family nervously gave her advice on whom to avoid, what situations to stay away from, and how to defend herself.” This was long before cell phones and 911, and she was driving home one night in a car with a cranky battery, on snow-slick streets. “If she could just not stop, the car would keep running. Of course the traffic light turned red at the most desolate intersection, the car choked, and died. She tried the ignition, but nothing happened. Dawn looked up to see a pair of headlights, and smiled in relief. But when the car stopped and three young black men jumped out, fear engulfed her. The driver came to her window, and she could hear her mother’s voice in her ear, ‘Don’t do it!’ She hesitantly rolled the window down. When he asked if she needed help, Dawn paused and said she had cables in the trunk. She tentatively opened the car door and stepped out to unlock the trunk. The fellows set to work. She got back behind the wheel and turned on the key, and the engine started. The guys grinned and slapped a few backs. Dawn reached for her purse and pulled out the few dollars she had, saying something like ‘It’s all I have but it’s yours, I appreciate your help.’ The one guy turned down the money. He must have seen the fear still lingering in her eyes, because

he smiled, and almost sounded like her mother when he said, 'You shouldn't be out alone on these streets.' Dawn says she realized in that encounter that she would never look at anyone again and simply label them according to their skin color or ethnicity or wealth. She liked what she saw in that young man's eyes. That encounter clicked open a door to a whole world of understanding that she has never forgotten." (*The Christian Science Monitor*, 1/16/09)

For most of us, there are times that our first impressions of someone may not end up being totally correct. We make decisions about people before we have all the information about them, or before we even have a chance to build a relationship with them. We make assumptions about what we first see.

Nathanael may have been like many of us, when it comes to first impressions. He's told about this amazing person, Jesus, someone who fills the bill as God's promised Messiah. "Perhaps Nathanael is reluctant to leave work and a busy schedule to go see this preacher who's filling his friend's head with who knows what nonsense. John tells us that Nathanael is less than impressed with Philip's description of this Jesus—he's from Nazareth, of all places. Nathanael doesn't expect much" (*The Christian Century*, 1/13/09)

He dismisses Jesus before he's ever met him—this Jesus who comes from another hometown in Galilee that is not his own. We hear Nathanael ask, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" We're not quite sure where that attitude comes from, except there was a general understanding that Nazareth was a little, nowhere, across-the-tracks kind of town. Nobody famous came from there. Or maybe Nathanael's hometown had some kind of rivalry with Nazareth. In Midwestern terms, their football or basketball team is the arch rival of Nathanael's school.

But by the time Nathanael meets Jesus, has a first-hand experience of him, he sees Jesus in a different light, and we hear him confess his faith in him as the Son of God. And I suppose it's not surprising that Jesus' first impression of Nathanael was on target. He names him as someone who is honest, forthright, not deceptive—naming things as he sees them. Jesus had a way of immediately seeing something deeper in Nathanael, and that may have been what moved Nathanael towards seeing something deeper in Jesus. Jesus may have been the one Nathanael needed so that he could grow and change.

I was once enrolled in a water exercise class that I enjoyed, but that didn't challenge me much. The camaraderie was fun, I liked the instructor, but physically it was really too easy. Then, a new instructor appeared. She was very energetic and expected much more of the participants. At first glance, I thought, "who are you to be changing our routine? I'm out of here. What happened to all the fun?" But I didn't leave, and after a few weeks of sore muscles, I could tell that whether I liked it or not, this new instructor was giving me the kind of workout I really needed.

People come across our paths who challenge us. We make judgments about them, create first impressions, before we ever really give them a chance, or get to know them. Our impressions may be influenced by a person's skin color, their country of origin, their age, their economic standing, their gender, their language, or a thousand other ways we have to make a judgment about them.

And whenever our first impressions are challenged, or we are called to struggle with our prejudices, we may learn something new and we may never be the same again, just like that young woman was, after having those fellows help her with her dead battery.

On Tuesday, as we inaugurate the 44<sup>th</sup> president of our country, we are being challenged with something new. And whether we voted for Barack Obama or not, I hope we will give him a chance, and perhaps move beyond any prejudiced first impressions we might have had. A lot will be laid at his feet: expectations to fix an ailing economy, to create jobs, to deal with increasing health care needs, to determine a road ahead for our military involvement in places like Iraq. The list is huge. And because he is a person of color, many of our expectations about him may be seen through the sometimes hazy lenses of our own prejudice. Yet, his election itself has made a change, a change that may move us to grow. Because for the first time, we will have an African American person as our President.

For the past 33 years, at this time of the year, UM Bishop Woodie White, writes an annual letter to Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. In this year's letter, Bishop White says that "this election will impact an area that has been at the heart of America's failure as a nation. I believe it will bring to an end the dying ideology of 'they.' American racism is grounded in an often unspoken declaration of innate inferiority and superiority. It is based on the claim that one's race is the determinative factor in ability and achievement."

Nathanael's question is still our question today. Although, the words we use might be a little different, since I'm not aware there's a Nazareth nearby. But we might ask, Can anything good come from: the inner city, the rural sticks, south of the border, a person of color, a woman CEO, a teenager, an older employee. On and on, we make assumptions, we hang on for dear life to first impressions, and we miss sharing the gifts we can all offer, the gifts of humanity, one person to another. As we walk into the uncertainties of a changing world, may we move forward with new eyes, to see sometimes at second glance, the good in all of our brothers and sisters.

--Sue Burwell