

Second Sunday after Epiphany  
I Samuel 3:1-10, Psalm 139, John 1:43-51  
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When I started my freshman year at the University of Rhode Island, I didn't know a soul. My dormitory roommate was very different from me, and I knew right away we weren't ever going to be close. Just when I was feeling that perhaps URI was a mistake, I happened to run into another freshman who lived on my dorm floor named Joe Hooks.

When we happened to cross paths one late afternoon, Joe had some athletic cleats strung around his neck. I asked about them, and he said he was playing on the freshman soccer team. I told him that I had played a little soccer my senior year in high school on a club team one of the assistant athletic coaches had started. Joe replied, "Why don't you come and play on the team; we need more players."

I went to practice the next afternoon and it changed my life. I found meaningful athletic expression, which had always been a big part of my past, and a group of great friends I would have throughout my time at the university. Joe and I still stay in touch. Joe's simple invitation to come, and in this case play soccer, probably saved my college experience.

When we were seniors, it was the same Joe Hooks that invited me to attend something called an Episcopal church. I've never left.

Some of us can get pretty weak in the knees whenever we hear the word "evangelism" because we equate it with talking to strangers about our relationship with Jesus. Some people love to do that, but it is only one way to be "evangelical." In fact today, I suspect more people might come to a living faith if we simply invite them to a church activity that we attend and warmly welcome them when they show up. We can trust the Holy Spirit to touch their hearts and instruct their minds through participation first. Proper belief can come with time once they feel included.

I'm paraphrasing a quote I recall, "The way to God's heart is first through a human heart." In other words, it can take our loving hearts extended to others to help them find the love God has for them.

A good example of this is a young girl who wasn't baptized as an infant but was brought here to experience our Sunday School. She really likes it and wants to come every Sunday now. She is already teaching her parents Bible stories and is exhibiting a remarkably simple yet strong faith in God. The other day she told her grandmother that she wants to be baptized.

Invitation first, participation and practice second, and belief will follow. This is a far different model than when we thought we had to get people saved by accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior before they could be part of our Christian fellowship. This thankfully has never really been the Episcopal way of growing the church, but we all know about it.

Philip, for reasons unknown to us, accepts an outright call to follow Jesus without hesitation. He is the exception. Nathaniel is more representative of us and perhaps most people today. He is initially skeptical of Philip's enthusiastic proclamation of having found the one who fulfills the law and the prophet's role as the Jewish messiah.

In the first place, Nathaniel notes that nothing good can come from Nazareth anyway. Nazareth may not have a reputation as a forsaken place, but it is not mentioned in the Hebrew Scriptures and is, therefore, an unlikely place for one so important.

Perhaps Nathaniel is further unimpressed with someone from Nazareth because Nathaniel comes from a rival village. The Cana Rock Slingers always lose to the Nazareth Swordsmen in the big annual Thanksgiving football game.

I am always impressed with Philip in that, even though Nathaniel seems to squash and denigrate his new found discovery, Philip isn't offended. He simply takes another tack. His theological approach fails, so he says, "Please then, come and see for yourself." Nathaniel does and the conversion happens.

We can all say, "Come and see for yourself." We can all be evangelists in that way if we are willing to care enough about people to offer them an experience of the divine that we have.

Jesus certainly doesn't let Philip down. Jesus begins by giving Nathaniel the highest compliment, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no guile." In other words, "Nathaniel, you are an upstanding person in every way." Jesus knows him even before Nathaniel meets Jesus. The traditional place for studying and meditating on scripture was beneath a fig tree. Jesus doesn't say anything about who he is but everything about who Nathaniel is, and that convinces Nathaniel that Jesus is indeed the promised one.

Jesus knows that people are essentially good at heart, and he wants to affirm that in all of us. Jesus wants to further develop our strengths rather than be critical of our weaknesses. We, too, should always be looking for the good in others and point it out to them.

The psalmist states that God knows we are all marvelously made because God made us beginning in our mother's womb. What if a large aspect of our holy mission were to communicate in various ways to everyone we meet that we know they, too, are marvelously made? That could change the world for sure.

While young Samuel heard the Lord speak directly to him, most of the time we will hear God speak to us less directly. Of course, we can hear God through scripture, a most excellent source. God can speak to us through other spiritual writings as well as novels, movies, radio or the Internet. We can hear God through a well trained conscience and probably most often through other people.

A woman who has just started attending Christ and Grace told us at Monday Bible study last week that she hadn't been attending any church for a while when a friend called her out of the blue and said, "Betsy, it's time for you to start going back to church." She heard it as a divine message and decided to try Christ and Grace. She initially attended our Christmas Eve service where she felt very comfortable and welcomed. She said the same thing happened when she came to the Tuesday evening Epiphany service.

I don't believe God ever stops calling us and will use every means possible to get our attention. We want to be both on the listening end and the inviting, welcoming, affirming, gently guiding voice of the divine as well. When we do, the heavens will be more and more opened for us all.  
AMEN.