

The Church of the Transfiguration
The Second Sunday After the Epiphany
John 1:43-51

I Saw You Under the Fig Tree

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I don't watch a lot of TV. But my husband Michael does. And so he's always trying to get me to watch one TV show or another.

Recently Michael told me about the series "The Gilded Age" and urged me to watch it because he thought that I would really like it. Well, I'm so glad that I listened to him – I loved the show so much that I binge-watched two whole seasons in a matter of weeks!

How many of you know about the "The Gilded Age"? For those of you who don't, it's a fictionalized series that takes place in New York City in the 1880s – just a few decades after our parish was founded. The show focuses on the battle between two camps: (1) the "old money" – as represented by establishment families such as the Astors – and (2) the "new money" – as represented by wealthy industrialists such as the Vanderbilts and the Rockefellers (or, in this case, the Russells).

I suspect that one of the reasons why I love "The Gilded Age" so much is that it tells the story of how The Metropolitan Opera was founded. (You knew that I couldn't preach without mentioning the opera, right?) Prior to 1883, Manhattan's opera house was the Academy of Music, which was located on 14th Street near Union Square. Now opera in those days wasn't just a matter of music. It was also a matter of high society. People went to the opera in order to see – and be seen by – others. And what better way to do that than to sit in an opera box?

Unfortunately the Academy of Music only had a limited number of opera boxes, and all of them were already occupied by the establishment families. As such, the newcomers were unable to sit in any opera boxes, despite their wealth. Eventually they got so fed up that they pooled their money and founded an opera house of their own: The Metropolitan Opera. As a result, the newcomers now had access to numerous opera boxes from which they could be seen.

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Like "The Gilded Age," today's gospel reading is also about being seen. Specifically, we hear about the disciple Nathanael and how he was seen by Jesus.

One day, Nathanael's friend Philip told him that he had found the Messiah as prophesized in the Law and the Prophets. Philip said that the Messiah was Jesus, the son of Joseph from Nazareth. Nathanael was skeptical and responded in a rather cranky way. He said to Philip, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" Nazareth was, after all, nothing more than a rural backwater region of Judea. Philip ignored his friend's reaction and responded by saying "Come and see."

When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, Jesus looked at him and said, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael was surprised by this and asked him, "Where did you get

to know me?” Jesus answered, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.” Nathanael was so shocked that he blurted out that Jesus was the Son of God and the King of Israel.

“I saw you under the fig tree.” That’s what Jesus said to Nathanael. In other words, Jesus saw Nathanael before Nathanael even knew who Jesus was. And that mattered deeply to Nathanael.

Now all this talk of “seeing” is somewhat ironic because Nathanael has been largely ignored by the Christian tradition. To me, Nathanael is basically the “Jan Brady,” or the neglected middle child, of the disciples.

The odd thing is that Nathanael is only mentioned twice in the Bible – here (at the beginning of John’s gospel), and at the very end of John’s gospel (when he goes fishing with Jesus after the resurrection). But nothing in between. Christians throughout the centuries have been puzzled by this, and they’ve tried to explain away Nathanael’s mysterious absence by saying that he actually had two names and was really St. Bartholomew.

Anyway, given the relative lack of attention to Nathanael in the Bible, it’s not surprising that there’s not a lot of Christian art that depicts Nathanael’s story. In fact, the image on the cover of today’s bulletin is one of the few paintings that exist about our gospel passage.

If you look at the image, you’ll see that Nathanael is the man on the left side of the painting. He’s laying on his side, wearing a spotted shirt, underneath a large fig tree. And Jesus is on the right side of the painting. Do you see Jesus? He’s dressed in white, walking up a hill and looking towards Nathanael.

This painting is by the French artist James Tissot, and it’s owned by the Brooklyn Museum. It was painted between 1886 and 1894, right around the time when the events of “The Gilded Age” took place. Tissot was a talented artist and was friends with famous Impressionists such as Edgar Degas and James Whistler.

Tissot made a lot of money by painting portraits of his wealthy patrons. Later in life, however, Tissot had a profound conversion experience. He ended up traveling several times to the Holy Land, where he studied the local architecture and landscape. (That’s probably why this painting seems a lot more realistic to me than the blond-haired, blue-eyed Jesus paintings of my Roman Catholic childhood.) Anyway, Tissot ultimately created an amazing series of 350 paintings that depicted the events of Jesus’ life, including this one.

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The seeing of Nathanael by Jesus in today’s gospel passage is a very different kind of seeing than what the “new money” was craving for in “The Gilded Age.” The newcomers wanted access to the opera boxes at the Academy of Music because they wanted to be physically seen. They also wanted to be seen, or recognized, by the establishment. By contrast, Jesus’ encounter with Nathanael involved a deeper kind of seeing. When Jesus looked at Nathanael, he saw him in the same way that someone might see a close friend or partner – that is, “beneath the surface.”

Now why does this matter? Well, I don’t know about you, but whenever someone sees me “beneath the surface,” I know that I matter to that person. I’m not just the sum of the bullet points on my resume. I’m not just one of eight billion people who happens to be currently living on this earth. And I’m not just a speck of dust that was brought into existence for a brief moment of time by some cosmic accident. When I am truly seen, I know that I am loved for who I am. I matter.

Now we know that Jesus saw Nathanael “beneath the surface” because Jesus called him out for being one of those people who – how should I put it? – lacks a filter. That is, Jesus knew that Nathanael had the “gift” of saying pretty much whatever was on his mind. (We all know people like that, right?) Recall that when Nathanael’s friend Philip told him about Jesus, Nathanael blurted out “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

That’s why Nathanael was so surprised when Jesus looked at him and said, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.” Jesus saw Nathanael deeply, and Jesus recognized that Nathanael was so honest that there was no deceit in him. And at that moment, Nathaniel knew that he mattered – and that he was loved by Jesus.

This kind of deep seeing is also described in today’s psalm. In Psalm 139, the psalmist says that God knows everything about us – from our “sitting down” to our “rising up,” as well as our “thoughts from afar.” Why? Because God was the one who “knit” and “wove” us into existence. So of course God sees us deeply. We matter to God.

This kind of deep seeing is also described in today’s Hebrew Bible reading about the prophet Samuel. Samuel, who was just a boy, was being mentored by Eli, one of the High Priests. God recognized Samuel’s gifts and called him in the middle of the night to be one of his prophets. But Samuel couldn’t see his own gifts – and so he thought that it was just Eli speaking to him. Samuel mattered to God, even when Samuel himself didn’t know it.

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This weekend we celebrate the life and ministry of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In the same way that Jesus saw Nathanael deeply in today’s gospel reading, Dr. King also saw others “beneath the surface.” Dr. King understood that we human beings are much more than just our surface traits such as race or skin color. Dr. King knew that each of us mattered, and that each of us is loved.

Throughout his ministry, Dr. King taught others to see the full humanity of African Americans and of other marginalized people. Dr. King practiced what he preached. There’s a recent movie – *Rustin* – that tells the moving story of Bayard Rustin, Dr. King’s right-hand man who organized the 1963 March on Washington. That march is where Dr. King delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech.

Despite the fact that Rustin was a gay man – and even though the vast majority of Christians in the early 1960s viewed LGBTQ+ people negatively (think of today’s epistle reading from First Corinthians, but far worse) – Dr. King knew that Rustin mattered. Even though there were ups and downs in their friendship over the years, Dr. King ultimately saw Rustin for who he truly was, and he loved him.

Dr. King understood that racial discrimination, segregation, and other forms of exclusion were fundamentally evil because they prevent us from seeing our neighbors truly as they are: beloved children of God. And Dr. King paid the ultimate price for proclaiming that message – just as Jesus did.

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During this Epiphany season – a season of revelation, illumination, and light – may we come to understand that Jesus sees each of us deeply. May we know that – no matter how lonely or isolated we might feel – we matter and that we are loved. May we, in turn, see others “beneath the surface” – and, in particular, see the full humanity of the strangers in our midst.

Finally, may we recognize that you don’t need a box at The Metropolitan Opera to be seen.



James Tissot, "Nathanaël sous le figuier" (1886-94), Brooklyn Museum.