

Don't you sometimes wish that you could have been there, you could have seen them in person? I mean the disciples and, of course, Jesus himself. I hear people say things like that once in a while. Wouldn't it have been something to meet Peter or to shake Matthew's hand? What if even now we could somehow go back in time to hear the Sermon on the Mount? Often when people wish for such things, the motivation seems to be a combination of healthy curiosity and the idea that maybe it would be easier to believe the gospel if we had seen gospel events unfold before our very eyes.

Personally, I doubt that latter point. I am not at all convinced that seeing the disciples would make the gospel easier to believe. In fact, seeing the disciples in person might even make it more difficult! The disciples were not, after all, from society's upper echelons. They were not highly educated, well-dressed, or visibly impressive. The odds are that if you had met up with Jesus' band of followers, the first thing that would have struck you would have been their commonness. You would perhaps notice their dirty fingernails, the callouses on their hands, the missing teeth that were on obvious display every time one of them grinned. You might be surprised at how short and stubby a couple of them were and would note the poor grammar that they often employed.

We need to forget about the illustrations from those well-meaning children's Bibles. In those pictures the disciples tend to be pretty handsome with well-groomed beards, sporting robes worthy of a Middle Eastern crowned prince. In such depictions the disciples were always clean and remarkably Anglo-looking. The fashions may have changed over time, but in an era when tunics and robes were what people wore, we often visualize the disciples wearing the ancient equivalent of Armani designer suits. Fact is, though, they were no doubt far more common and ragged looking. But this morning, we need to wonder if we are so very different from them ourselves. Maybe we're not much to look at, either. But, maybe that's Good News after all.

Because somehow that rag-tag group of uneducated fishermen were in touch with the deepest truth and dearest secret of the universe. Those ordinary fellows changed history by their witness. It's quite remarkable. In fact, as Frederick Buechner* once noted, this all has a fairy tale-like feel to it.

Most everybody has a soft spot in their hearts for fairy tales. There is just something about a fairy tale's reversal of expectations that intrigues us—finding out the frog is really a handsome prince or that the ugly duckling grows into the most splendid of all swans. If you took the disciples and placed them all in one room, you would never in your wildest

dreams guess by looking at them that this common and weak group of ordinary fellows could change the world. But they did. The disciples changed the world because it was to them that the secret of the kingdom of God was first revealed.

That's why Jesus called them. If you're going to save the world, you've got to start somewhere. And John chapter 1 gives us a clue about where Jesus started. If in the end you're going to save the world through humility, gentleness, compassion, and sacrifice, it makes sense to begin with a bunch of guys who couldn't get more humble if they tried! The messengers fit the message. In fact, over the course of his ministry if Jesus had any significant struggles with his disciples, it was the struggle to *keep* them humble and ordinary-looking. Every time a couple of them started angling for power or arguing among themselves as to who was the greatest, Jesus slapped them back down to street level.

The disciples needed to be common, ordinary, and above all humble if they were going to do Jesus any good and so change the world. Still, Jesus did need them and that's why he called them. But in the calling process, there was more going on than we realize. Our passage from John 1 is a case in point. Jesus has already attracted Simon Peter and his brother Andrew when he calls a man named Philip to follow him. No sooner does Philip join Jesus' still-small group of disciples, he runs to fetch his brother, Nathanael. Near as we can tell, Nathanael, though a follower of Jesus, did not become one of the inner-circle of twelve disciples. Yet his particular call to follow Jesus is remarkable.

Based on the external evidence alone, you'd have to say that Nathanael dove in based on little more than a kind of spiritual parlor trick: Jesus claims to have seen Nathanael sitting under a fig tree even before Philip went to get him. Jesus seemed to know that was a neat trick but not exactly the most startling thing in the world! Still, it was enough for Nathanael to sign on even as it motivated him to declare openly that near as he could tell, Jesus was "*the Son of God...and the king of Israel.*" Nathanael's confession was fairly simple, but in this story, Jesus reveals some pretty amazing things if we pay close attention to the gospel story. Twice in this brief passage there are very telling allusions or references to a key Old Testament figure: Jacob.

The first reference crops up in the curious way that Jesus greets Nathanael. Jesus says, "*Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.*" The RSV translates that verse as "*in whom there is no guile.*" The Greek word used in verse 47 can also mean craftiness, being tricky, underhanded. There are not too many biblical characters who are described as being full of guile, but the most famous person who was a trickster par excellence was Jacob: the crafty deceiver who eventually was re-named Israel. That's why some have

paraphrased Jesus' words here to say something like, "*Here is an Israelite with no Jacob in him! Here is a son of Jacob who is not a chip off the old block!*"

Jacob, as you may recall, always got ahead in life by his own wits. He relied on his own cunning and craftiness to snag life's goodies. He outsmarted dim-witted Esau, did an end-run on his nearly blind father Isaac, and then spent the better part of twenty years finding ever-more creative ways to snooker his Uncle Laban out of just about everything he owned.

For some reason, though, God liked Jacob. Once, when fleeing the wrath of Esau, Jacob had a dream of a ladder to heaven with angels ascending and descending on it. In that dream God assures Jacob that despite all the stunts Jacob had pulled, God was with him. And God would stay with Jacob, finally and quite literally wrestling him into an understanding that the best things in life come by grace alone. It's not about the power to take what you want. No, it's about being humble to receive what only God can give.

"Here comes an Israelite who is not Jacob," Jesus basically said when he first saw Nathanael coming his way. It was nice for Jesus to say this, all the more so considering that the last thing Nathanael had said before meeting Jesus was a sneering comment: "*Nazareth! Can anything (or anyone) good come from there?*" That's what Nathanael said, an apparently honest thing to say.

Because Jesus as much as replies, "You're right, Nathanael: I'm not much to look at. But I'll let you in on a little secret: I'm the One!" Nathanael believes this and Jesus then responds by declaring himself to be the living Bethel. When Jacob had that dream of a ladder to heaven, he declared the place where he had the dream to be "beth-el," Hebrew for "the house of God." Jacob was surprised to find himself at the intersection between God and the earth. So he called the spot "God's House," "Bethel," the place where God and people meet. But in John 1 Jesus now tells Nathanael that he himself is the intersection point: if you were with him, you were in the presence of God!

It's as though the whole story of the whole Bible is getting a re-boot, a fresh start. Jesus is founding a new Israel, a brand-new people. Gone are the days of craftiness and guile when people had to live by their wits to survive. A new era of grace and innocence has dawned, a time that requires an almost child-like ability to embrace the fairy tale-like truth of Jesus. It may be yet another way of saying that to enter the kingdom of God, you need to be like a little child. And in many ways, Nathanael and the others *were* like children. The disciples, as it turns out, are the frogs who turn into princes.

Most of us are driven by dreams of success. Curiously, however, most people admit they never realize what they truly desire in their pursuit of success: things like contentment, fulfillment, satisfaction, and relief. Culture demands that we work longer hours, push further ahead, let nothing hinder our quest—not our marriage or family, not our convictions or conscience, not our health or relationships. At the risk of sounding ultra-simplistic, I'd like to offer some counsel that is 180 degrees from the cultural norm. Don't look in the Wall Street Journal or in the latest issue of Forbes magazine, but rather in the epistle Peter wrote in the first century: "*God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time*" (1 Peter 5:5-6).

The once burly, self-determined fisherman from Galilee knew the sting of failure followed by the gentle mercy of Christ. He finally learned the wonder of humility and obedience. Let's think of it as the forgotten side of success. It's also the reward that comes to those who wish to develop the heart of a servant. The disciples went the distance with Jesus, through betrayals and denials and abandonment, when finally by grace alone they arrive on the other side of that great event we call Easter.

That's the only place we find Nathanael again. Nathanael makes just one more appearance in the Bible and it comes in the very last chapter of John (21:2). Nathanael is a kind of book-end character for John's gospel, appearing in only the first and final chapters. Years before, Jesus told Nathanael that he hadn't seen anything yet. Having been to the cross and back, Nathanael now agreed. Hallelujah! Amen.

*Frederick Buechner's *Peculiar Treasures* (Harper & Row 1979, pp. 115-117) gives inspiring help on some background on Nathanael.)