

“No Deceit”

Rev. Dr. Peter Bynum

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⁴³*The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, ‘Follow me.’*

⁴⁴*Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.”*

⁴⁶*Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”*

Philip said to him, “Come and see.”

⁴⁷*When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!”*

⁴⁸*Nathanael asked him, “Where did you come to know me?”*

Jesus answered, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.”

⁴⁹*Nathanael replied, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”*

⁵⁰*Jesus answered, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.” ⁵¹And he said to him, “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” (John 1: 43-51)*

Mark Twain once said that he could go two months on a good compliment. That makes me wonder how long Nathanael rode the wave of the compliment he received from Jesus. If the Lord gives you a compliment, I expect that can keep you going for a while.

The apostle Philip has just been called by Jesus in the standard way described in the gospels: Jesus met him on the road, and said “Follow me.” Nathanael, however, does not receive his initial invitation directly from Jesus. It comes from his friend Philip, who seeks Nathanael out to tell him that he has finally found the chosen one they have been looking for. Nathanael is skeptical, since Jesus is from Nazareth and Nathanael does not seem to think too highly of people from that town. But he goes with his friend Philip anyway, and as soon as Jesus comes into view, Jesus calls out, saying “Here comes a person in whom there is no deceit!”

Nathanael’s first response is the one we would likely have if we received a compliment from someone we had never met. “You don’t know me. How could you possibly know what I am really like?” But when Jesus describes where Nathanael had been early that morning, and what he had been doing while he was standing alone waiting for Philip, Nathanael was clearly convinced that Jesus was indeed the Son of God. My guess is that initial compliment, those first words from Jesus, shaped his understanding of himself from that day forward, giving him great assurance, encouragement, and confidence. An honest compliment is a gift that we all treasure, but when it comes from Christ, well, that is an extraordinary gift indeed.

So, this morning I want us to think about the meaning of this compliment received by Nathanael. *Dolos*, the Greek noun we translate as “deceit,” appears eleven times in the New Testament. It is usually translated as “deceit,” but it can also mean “stealth,”



“craftiness,” “guile,” or “treachery.”¹ Therefore, Jesus’ compliment to Nathanael was that he was free of these negative qualities. Instead of being sneaky or underhanded, he was honest and forthright. He valued the truth, and he spoke the truth.

Given that the title of this sermon is “No Deceit,” we need to be totally honest right from the start, and if we are being totally honest with ourselves, we have to admit that we all practice a little deception now and then. History proves this point. Think about Jacob, the biblical namesake of Israel, who cleverly disguised himself for the specific purpose of deceiving his blind father and cheating his older brother out of his birthright....

...or the story of Odysseus and the Greeks, who turned the tide in the Trojan War by building a huge wooden horse, leaving it at the gates of Troy, and then pretending to sail away. The Trojans, assuming the gift to be a peace offering and an act of surrender, triumphantly wheeled the horse through the city gates. Later that night, a contingent of elite Greek soldiers who had been quietly hiding inside the horse opened up those gates and the invading Greeks easily took the city...

...or three thousand years later, when the Allies took a page out of Greek history in planning the D-Day invasion. With Hitler watching every troop and ship movement like a hawk, the Allies resorted to a massive campaign of deception to keep the location of the Normandy landings a secret. Using fabricated radio transmissions, fake inflatable tanks, dummy parachute drops, and other misinformation, the Allies managed to throw the Germans off the trail and take them by surprise at Normandy on June 6, 1944.

But deception also operates on a much smaller scale, and it happens all the time. Little white lies can guard someone’s tender feelings. A little misdirection can give you a leg up on the competition. After all, if you are going to play poker, you need to learn to bluff. It is never completely pure, it is never completely truthful, and there is always a little sin in the mix, but deception, if we are honest about it, can be helpful from time to time. And even if it is not helpful, it is definitely part of human nature. As the author Jane Austen once wrote, “Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised or a little mistaken.”

Even so, there is something appealing, even magnetic, about this compliment that Jesus gives to Nathanael. Nathanael wasn’t perfect, any more than you or I are perfect. But to be recognized as someone truthful, someone earnest, and honest and true, that is a noble aspiration, a lofty goal worth pursuing. So let’s dive a little deeper into this compliment, because as it turns out the word “deceit” has a number of different connotations in the scriptures, and we can learn something from each of them.

The first connotation of *dolos*, or deceit, is one we find most clearly in the gospels of Matthew and Mark. There, deceit *can* mean “**baiting**,” as if a trap is being laid. Adversaries like the scribes and Pharisees were always laying traps for Jesus. They would bait him with tricky questions, not because they were genuinely interested in the answers, but because they hoped Jesus might say something they could use to discredit or diminish him. It was the same kind of mean-spirited craftiness that was condemned by Psalm 10, which criticized ways that the rich and powerful were taking advantage of the poor. “*Their mouths are filled with cursing and deceit and oppression,*” the psalmist wrote.

“[U]nder their tongues are mischief and iniquity. They sit in ambush in the villages; in hiding places they murder the innocent. Their eyes stealthily watch for the

¹ <https://biblehub.com/greek/1388.htm>

helpless; they lurk in secret like a lion in its covert; they lurk that they may seize the poor; they seize the poor and drag them off in their net. They stoop, they crouch, and the helpless fall by their might.”²

So, one of the things Jesus was saying about Nathanael was that he was not tricky or conniving. If he was talking with you, it was not to trap you. And if he asked you a question, it was because he earnestly wanted to know the answer. There was no dark, hidden agenda.

A second connotation of “deceit” in scripture is ***flattery***. As I see it, flattery and compliments differ in one key respect: motive. Compliments are given out of genuine admiration, but flattery tends to be manipulative and fake. Like Eddie Haskell. For those of you under 50, Eddie Haskell was a weaselly teenager from the 1950’s sitcom “Leave it to Beaver.” To parents, Eddie was always polite and deferential, but the moment the parents left the room, the real Eddie came out – snarky, conniving, and self-interested.³ That is what flattery looks like and smells like.

What Jesus saw in Nathanael was the opposite of Eddie Haskell. Nathanael was a person who was genuine, a person who spoke openly and honestly. There was nothing fake about him. With Nathanael, what you saw was what you got. And I think that is something we could use a lot more of these days.

Last but not least, a third aspect of “deceit” in the Bible is something that Nathanael himself shows us in his response to Jesus. When we choose to be deceitful, we make a choice to turn away from the best parts of ourselves. We close ourselves off to light, and goodness, and love. But that does not just happen when we choose to do bad things; it can also be our response when bad things happen to us. If we are mistreated, if we feel like we have been taken advantage of or injured by another, or if we feel like we are getting more than our fair share of misfortune, a natural response is for us to close up our hearts. It is a rational and understandable defense mechanism, a choice to guard ourselves from further injury or disappointment.

But once again, what Nathanael shows us in this story is the opposite of that. Nathanael shows us what it looks like to have an open heart.

Think about it this way. He and Philip, like so many others, had been looking for the Messiah, someone to right the wrongs of the world. And every time they thought they found that one, they had been disappointed. And now Nathanael hears that the latest messianic candidate grew up in Nazareth of all places. He was skeptical, and for good reason. But here’s the thing: ***Nathanael still went***. When Philip said, “*We have found him. Come and see,*” that is what Nathanael did. He went to see. He went because his heart had not been completely closed off by cynicism or hurt or sorrow. He went because he chose to trust his friend Philip. He went because the best part of him still believed it could be true. He didn’t lie to himself or anyone – he was honest about his doubt -- but he still made a choice to act on hope, and that is only possible when your heart is strong, and clean, and open.

Look, I don’t know about you, but that’s the kind of person I want to be. That’s the kind of person I want God to see in me, that I want my family and friends to see in

² Psalm 10:6-10.

³ <https://www.kitsapsun.com/story/money/columnists/business-journal/2017/10/25/fake-flattery-gets-your-office-nowhere/801013001/>

me... someone who is authentic, and not fake... honest, not sneaky... earnest, not conniving... and open, not as one who is fearing the worst, but as one who is hoping for the best. That's what I want God to see in me, and I expect that's what you want, too.

Just one last point and I'm done. If that is what we want – if we want to stand before God with no deceit, that is a very good thing, because with God, there is no other way. As Abraham Lincoln famously said, "You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time." I would add this, "And you cannot fool God **at any time.**" That's something that the writer of the psalm we read earlier in the service knew all too well. Psalm 139, verses 1-4: "*O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.*" Jesus knew Nathanael before he ever came into view, and God knows us the same way. God knows every flaw, every strength, every hair on our heads.

So, we may be able to deceive our neighbors, deceive our friends, and even deceive ourselves, but we can never, and will never, deceive God. With God there is just the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. The good news is that, with God, we are always safe in the truth. God is not trying to bait us or trap us... God is a flatterer... and God's heart is never closed to us.

"Do not fear," God says, "for I am with you; do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand."

With God, we can come with our doubts, we can come with our skepticism... we can come with our grandest hopes and our happiest dreams, for in God there is nothing dark, nothing sinister, nothing fake. In God, there truly is no deceit.

Amen.