

Sermon 09-07-2025
 Friendship with Obstacles – Rev. Markus Wegenast
 John 1:43-51

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. ⁴⁵ Philip 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 toward him, he said of him, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” ⁴⁸ Nathanael asked him, “Where did you get 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.” ⁵¹ And he said to him, “Very truly, I tell you,^[a] you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

Is making friends something that comes easy to you or is hard? Do you have a ton of friends, does it seem like you're a magnet or are you completely fine having just few close friends?

The other day I watched a YouTube clip that came with a caption that read: “Why is it so hard for grown-ups to make friends?” and you see a little girl standing in the driveway of her house. She sees another girl coming down the sidewalk fast on her kid bike and as she passes the girl in the driveway the driveway girl shouts: “Hi, you wanna be friends?” And you see the girl on the bike zoom past her and respond “ooookay!” and off she was – That easy!

Really, what is it that for some of us grown ups it's so hard to make friends compared to when we were kids?

Please don't expect from me to teach you today how to easily make friends – if I had a recipe for that I would probably be a motivational speaker and go on tour and charge a lot of money.

I'm not a motivational speaker. I'm a servant of the gospel of Jesus Christ and in today's gospel lesson we find a crucial element in the human journey of making friends. Actually, today's passage uses the term “finding friends.”

Today's gospel lesson: how to *find* friends.

_____ just read the story about how Jesus found Nathanael to become one of his friends, and not just any friend but one of his 12 disciples.

By the way, I'm not making that up that the disciples were Jesus' friends, Jesus himself calls them “friends” in John 15:15 – we will look at that passage in more detail in a few weeks when we conclude our friendship series.

Today, however, we need to find out about what Jesus and Nathanael can teach us about making/ finding friends...

Nathanael is good a Israelite man – I call him good because Jesus calls him that (V. 47). He is from the small fishing village of Bethsaida on the north eastern shore of Lake Galilee. [People considered it part of the wider Galilee area which surrounded the lake, even though Bethsaida and the land east of the Jordan were politically outside of Herod Antipas's Galilee and part of the tetrarchy of Philip.]



Jesus was also from Galilee, but his hometown was about 20 miles away from Bethsaida. Nazareth was on the southwestern side of Lake Galilee.

I don't know what was going on with the people of those two villages, they must have had some sort of rivalry – for some reason they didn't think very highly of each other.

Who knows, maybe it was a rivalry as bad as that between let's say, Ohio and Michigan when it comes to college sports?

This very rivalry stood in the way and almost prevented good Nathanael from becoming friends with Jesus. Here he is in his own words after his friend Philipp tells him all excited that they found the Messiah:

Philip: “We have found him about whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.”

Nathanael: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”- John 1:45f

Can you feel the two emotions that clash in this scenario? Philip all excited and Nathanael less than impressed? Bring that into your world. Imagine you have a friend who comes to your friend group, all excited, saying: “Hey guys, we just found a really cool dude that we should hang out with. He's from Michigan!”

“Michigan? Are you nuts? No cool guy can ever come from Michigan...”

I am so glad that the Gospel writer John gives us this raw insight into how some of the disciples initially reacted to Jesus. It's actually quite spectacular. John's gospel

starts with the grandest opening of an introduction of Jesus. No other gospel, in fact no other part in the Bible tells us so explicitly about the greatness of Jesus. He was not only God's only begotten son but that he was with God from the very beginning upon the creation of the world. Jesus is God in person who came down to be born by a human mother so he could be God-with-us in person.

And even though the gospel of John presents Jesus to us that highly exalted, now he is met with contempt because of the village he was from. This really shows us that Jesus became human on all levels, even to the degree that he had to endure a very mean human trade:

Jesus had to deal with a typical human trade: Prejudice!

Nathanael was prejudiced against Jesus because of where he came from. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Prejudice can come in many forms and fashions. We can be prejudiced about another town, another schools, another culture, another race, another political view, I mean, you name it. Let me ask you: What are you prejudiced about?

The power of prejudice is a huge force that can hinder us from becoming friends, from making friends, from finding friends.

I'd like to invite you to think about this question unashamedly:

How does the power of prejudice stand in your way when it comes to finding friends?

As we wonder this question we realize, here lies the answer to the question we want to tackle today: How do we find friends. Sometimes we stand in our own way of finding friends because we put self-made obstacles of prejudice in our way that keep us from considering a friendship. For Nathanael that was almost the case, but fortunately Jesus intervenes...

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Nathanael is stuck in thinking: "What good can come out of Nazareth – I don't want to be friends with a Messiah who's from Nazareth, he can't possibly be the Messiah, he can't possibly become my new friend that I would follow." Jesus does not let this prejudice ruin his friendship with Nathanael. He is defeating Nathanaels prejudice and cynicism and he does it with the best strategy to defeat prejudice: kindness!

When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!"

Isn't that beautiful? Jesus could have been upset and grumpy, he could have gone into counter attack mode "you guys in Bethsaida are hillbillies". But instead, he looks at what is good in Nathanael. Don't you love Jesus for this? He models how not to let ugly human trades like prejudice stand in the way – he looks at the good in people.

I want to do that too. Do you want to do that too? Imagine our world when everyone had that kind of love and determination to stand up against the powers of rudeness, cynicism, and prejudice. Imagine.

But it gets even better:

⁴⁸ Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you."

You can tell, Nathanael is really dumbfounded by Jesus' kindness and he is also puzzled how it is that Jesus calls him a good person. They never met, how would he know anything about him?

Some regard this instance as the first official miracle that Jesus performs in the Gospel of John. The way many scholars of the Bible understand this passage is that Nathanael was all by himself when he sat under a fig tree so the only one who'd know he was there was Nathanael himself. Sitting under the fig tree *could* be a metaphor for being an ardent student of the Bible but it could also just literally mean that he was sitting under a real fig tree. Maybe munching on some of the figs that fell off. The miracle to Nathanael is that Jesus knew about him, he knew it because he was the son of God and that is what convinced Nathanael that Jesus – even though he was from Nazareth – was the Messiah.

If it took a miracle to help Nathanael to get over his prejudice about Jesus, you have all the right now to ask: Does that mean the only way for *me* to overcome a prejudice toward other people is by means of a miracle?

Does it really take a miracle to overcome the power of prejudice?

That seems a bit extreme, but I want to say:

Yes!

Holding a prejudice against someone is a powerful emotion that really messes up life the way God intends it for us (...). I think it is fair to say that because of the power of prejudice terrible wars have been fought in human history.

It always takes a miracle to overcome the obstacle of prejudice, distrust, rudeness and cynicism. The good news is: Jesus makes such miracles happen in your life! With the help of Jesus the obstacles to friendship can be destroyed.

Think about Jesus – think about what Jesus does in your life and what Jesus has done for you – is he really someone who wants you to hold on to prejudices against other people? No! Jesus reaches into your life to destroy the ugly power of prejudice so we can be free to be friends with people we never thought we would be friends with. I call that a miracle!!

I invite you today, as we are in the middle of a sermon series on true friendship:

Ask Jesus to do miracles in your life and remove obstacles that keep you from making new friends.

Story of an unlikely friendship

> Share story of former church member who was a staunch Republican and befriended an equally staunch but democrat church member...

If we walk away from today's church service with that determination in our heart – I believe we have won big times for our lives AND for God's desire to raise a people they are meant to be. And I have to tell you: I'm really excited to imagine this power of Jesus to play out in your life and your relationships.

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I think there is one more thing that we can gain from today's story to win big time:

For this we have to take a look at the other disciple that was mentioned in our story: Philip. His role is quite crucial. He was the one who found Jesus initially and introduced him to his friend Nathanael. He was the one who had to deal with Nathanael's prejudice first. When Nathanael said "What good can possibly come from Nazareth?" he said it to Philip, not to Jesus.

See what genius thing Philip does when Nathanael is rude and doesn't want to believe that the Messiah can really come from Nazareth. Do you remember what Philip said?

Philip said to him, "Come and see."

What a great man Philip was, what a great friend. He doesn't try to argue with Nathanael, he doesn't try to go down on his level and engage rudeness with counter rudeness, he stays focused and does the best thing he could. He was invitational and left the rest up to Jesus.

Friends isn't that what we are supposed to do when we are inviting a friend to meet Jesus? We can't talk anyone into becoming a believer. Yes, there are some nice ways to use apologetics to argue people into believing but I have found that avenue is not

always the best. If you have a gift for that, please, by all means, go for it. But chances are that you don't have the natural gift of evangelism to be a top missionary. You don't need to – what you need is faith that Jesus can break through to people in the same way as he broke through layers of obstacles for Nathanael.

“Come and see” just come and see. Come to youth group with me and find out what it's all about. Join me for a Wednesday night at COS and make your own observation about people living, singing, and ringing out their faith. Come help with my circle's mission project; come and see what it's like when people from church hang out. Come and see what it feels like to put one of the gifts that God has already given you into practice and join us for a praise team or a choir practice...

“Come and see” – what a perfect way to invite someone to meet Jesus.

This aspect of the Jesus-Philip-Nathanael-story may not be as directly related the question on how to make true friends, but you know, in a way, it is!

Isn't it an act of true friendship when you invite someone to come and see who Jesus is?

Sometimes we have to overcome obstacles before we can be friends. Don't get discouraged when you run into those. Be like Jesus, defeat them through kindness and love, and see how it changes your life, your friend's life, and life in this world. Amen.