

SNARKINESS AND CHRISTIAN VOCATION

Sermon for Epiphany 2B—Jn 1:43-51

LPC, 1/18/15

Can anything good come out of Nazareth?

I am hard-pressed to think of a snarkier comment in all of the Bible. And here it is, coming out of the mouth of Nathanael, one of Jesus' chosen twelve disciples. Now, to Nathanael's credit, he comes around pretty quickly and is one the daring first to declare aloud that Jesus is the Son of God.

But Nathanael was initially skeptical about Jesus, and that Jesus knew this and twitted Nathanael about it. I suspect that when Jesus says, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit," he is paraphrasing a well-known axiom of the day that might have gone something like, "You can fool some of the people all of the time, but you can't fool an Israelite." Jesus' comment is not without a bit of humor.

So, why do people act snarky? You don't have to be Sigmund Freud to know that people don't repeat a behavior unless there is some kind of reward in it. What reward is there in snarkiness? I suppose the answer to that is that being cynical and snide allows us to feel a bit superior.

There is a lot of cynicism and snideness in the world. It may be that it's always been there but people like me have become more aware of it in recent years because of the internet and because of what I think of as "bespoke news": news programs tailored to a particular audience. Nowadays no matter what your individual prejudices are, no matter how arcane, you can have them affirmed by some part of the media. It is obvious to me that this situation is not one that builds bridges. It does not build cooperation or relationship between persons. And it does not build the love of neighbor that characterizes the kingdom of heaven.

Just to review – the kingdom of heaven is what Jesus came into the world to bring near. The kingdom of heaven is what God wants all of God's people to participate in. The kingdom of heaven is where the hungry are fed, the sick are healed, the oppressed are liberated, justice is served, and love and forgiveness are offered to all. And it starts here, in this life. And we are called to participate in it. Here. Now.

I could end my sermon here with the simple message of "Don't be snarky. Build the kingdom of heaven." But the scripture passage under consideration is not about snarkiness, is it? It's about vocation. It's about the call of Jesus on our lives.

In this passage, Jesus calls Nathanael to follow him. As I've said before, what Jesus says to the disciples he is saying by extension to us. Jesus calls us as he called Nathanael to follow him. In our baptisms we are not only joined to the family of God, we are called to follow Jesus. This applies to every individual Christian. It also applies to groups of Christians like ours. Each of us has our individual vocation to follow Jesus. And as Lawrencefield Church we are together called to follow Jesus as a group.

How we are to follow Jesus, as individuals and as a group, can usually be discerned by honest and prayerful discernment of our spiritual gifts: those particular godly aspects of ourselves that come most naturally to us, and which can therefore be understood as what God has given us for the building up of God's kingdom.

The Greek word for gift is *charism*. I have been studying the concept of charism these past two weeks in my doctoral work. In the monastic context, charism has a specific meaning. The charism of a religious order is the particular and distinguishing gift of that order: the gift those religious brothers and sisters use to build up the kingdom of heaven. The charism of the Benedictines is humility, obedience and chastity. The charism of the Franciscans is poverty. The charism of the Dominicans is preaching, and so on.

What is Lawrencefield Church's charism, and how can it direct us to the building of the kingdom of heaven? As you know, as part of my doctoral study, I have also done, with the help of a small team, a comprehensive study of Lawrencefield Parish Church. I would like to read you an excerpt from the conclusion to that paper for one possible answer to the question, "What is the charism of Lawrencefield Church, and how we might use it to build the kingdom of heaven?"

We are a community of faith, love and joy, and as I noted above, we are well positioned to represent these qualities to the world around us in the form of Christian Hope, whether or not, when "in the world," we speak explicitly of religious beliefs. Many members are already doing this in the exercise of individual ministries, but as a parish can do more, and we can model Christian hope intentionally and conscious that we are serving the Kingdom of Heaven.

Lawrencefield's model could be that of a "mother house" from which missionaries disperse to serve in the world and to which they return for sustenance and inspiration. I think of church members who already exemplify this model: the retirement home staffer who treats the residents like family, the mechanic who does plumbing repairs gratis for elderly neighbors, the teacher who works with at-risk youth, the retired woman who volunteers to drive the disabled to appointments, the person who accompanies seriously ill friends to distant hospitals, the businessman who quietly writes large checks to support the local Soup Kitchen, the young father who teaches his sons about sustainable lifestyle choices, the elderly "prayer warrior." All these people come together on Sunday to worship and laugh and listen and share the body and blood of Christ, and then go out to serve Christ in the world, returning the following Sunday to repeat the cycle.

The aim of our efforts in supporting spirituality needs not only to be a closer relationship with God, but to serve the Kingdom of God in the world. Here at Lawrencefield, we have joy, faith and love. The world needs joy, faith and love. We need to be in the export business.

The snarkiness so evident in the world around us is evidence of how much the world needs what we have found here at Lawrencefield. Can we look upon that which we already have as our calling to building the kingdom of heaven in the world ... here ...now?