

What We Need Are More People Like Nate

John 1:43-51

Introduction: Quirky Town Names

Sometimes you do a double-take at the signs when you are driving down a state highway. You wonder, "Did I just read that right? Did someone name a town a silly name like that?" Take the back roads of Illinois and you are going to run into some strange names of towns that will leave you wondering, "What in the world were the citizens of that town doing give their town a name like that?" Here are a few - There is Goofy Ridge, Illinois (center part of the state). There's Birds, IL (southeastern at the Indiana border). There is Mechanicsburg, IL (center of the state).

Some rather quirky names for towns! But, I'd have to say my home state of Mississippi has got Illinois beat when it comes to strange town names.

- There is Hot Coffee, MS. I bet the coffee is good.
- There is Panther Burn, MS, where, according to legend, a wild panther was terrorizing the town and they caught the panther in barn and burned it up. "Burn, Panther burn."
- Then there is my favorite, Love, MS. I met a young woman who was from Love, who kept asking everyone if they had ever been in "Love." Since then, I wondered where in the world Love is located. I did not know until this past week when I was driving just south of Memphis, and I looked at my GPS map and saw that we were driving through Love at that very moment. Thing is, I couldn't see any evidence of a town anywhere. I suppose I can say "I've been in Love now, but it is was nothing special."

Scripture: Nate and Jesus

Nothing Special

Speaking of nothing special, there is a town we know about, the place where Jesus was from called Nazareth. Truth be told, it was nothing special. Even when I went to Nazareth back in the 1980's as a young pastor, it was nothing special. It stands there on a small group of hills with broken-down stone houses. You might even imagine that it could have looked like that when Jesus grew up there, if it were not for the power lines and the paved road. Poverty everywhere. Only a few trees. Rather barren. It looks lonely out there in the countryside of Israel.

Then we traveled on to our destination that night. We went to a Roman town called Tiberius, by the Galilean sea. Tiberius was where you went for a night out on the town, to the theatre or to the Roman baths. Tiberius is where the young people went to for a job. Not Nazareth. They don't even have a sign on the edge of town that says, "Nazareth, home of..." because it is the home of nobody important.

Jesus and Phillip

We find out about Nazareth in our reading from John's gospel today. Jesus meets Phillip and tells him to come and follow Him. Phillip is so excited about finding Jesus that he cannot contain himself and runs to go tell his friend Nathaniel about what he has found. He is a changed man - so he is excited to go and tell the people he knows best about what has happened to him.

We Can Understand Phillip

We can understand what Phillip did because we all know what it is like to find something special, a new movie or a book or a new restaurant. If the topic comes up, you tell people you know about what you have found and want them to have the same excitement that you have. How much more ought we be moved to tell people when we have found something so powerful and meaningful that it has transformed our lives. That is the essence of sharing our faith with others. It is like one hungry person who has found bread telling another hungry person where to find it. You don't hold back good news like that.

Phillip and Nathaniel

Phillip could not contain himself so he went to tell his friend Nathaniel. Good old Nate was not looking for or expecting what Phillip told him, "We have found Him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth." And good ole Nate lets out a laugh, "What you say? YOU found the messiah and he is from Nazareth? Ain't nothing good EVER come out of Nazareth!" Phillip is, who we might say, a person with emotional intelligence. He does not argue with Nate, he just simply says, "Come and find out for yourself." He is so confident in this One who has transformed his life that he makes a simple invitation that any of us can make, "Come and see." Sharing faith is that simple. Come find what I have discovered. See for yourself. Everyone here is capable of doing that.

Nate and Jesus

Nate goes to meet Jesus and as he is walking towards him Jesus yells out to him, "A true Israelite who has no falsehood in him." Other translations say, "has no deceit." Another says, "Now here is a genuine son of Israel—a man of complete integrity." Nate cannot understand how Jesus knew what he said to Phillip about anything good coming out of Israel. How could Jesus know he was so honest with his thought when Jesus was nowhere around? When he realizes that it was a miracle, that Jesus has deep insight into his heart, knows him, even from afar, Nate comes to complete faith. He is transformed by the experience of being seen and known and loved.

Application: Integrity and Authority

Meanings of the Story

This is a story that reveals to us who Jesus is. Jesus is one full of truth and grace, who can see to the hearts of who people are and love them and call them to follow Him. It is true of Nicodemus and the woman at the well. It is true of Nate. To be known and loved by Jesus is to be transformed and finding purpose and direction. This is also a story about how the faith grew in the number of followers. One person finds bread and shares where to find bread with another person. The faith is passed on as it has always been by people who want to share what they know and have experienced with other people. This story is an invitation to do something really quite simple: Tell people your excitement about what you have found and invite them to "Come and see."

Focus: We Need More People Like Nate: Integrity

This morning I am drawn to another insight, one that is not the central lesson of our story, but one I find to be particularly relevant to our time. What we need in this world are more people like Nate. We need people who have integrity. It is one thing to say you believe

something and another to live up to what you say your believe. Words are not as important as actions. We would all rather see a sermon than hear one.

Illustration: Giant Cross

I shared with you in a newsletter article about the enormous cross that was constructed outside of my hometown along I-55 by good and intended Christians, who feel the great threat we all feel towards the faith we practice and love. It rises up in the sky as an announcement that their community is taking a stand for the faith and the rise of the secular world that is such a threat to the church and a Christian way of life. I can understand. There are times I feel defensive and afraid for what the future is for our faith and the church that has been so important to shaping who I am.

Defensiveness and Fear - Integrity and Compassion

But our defensiveness and our fear is not a way to change people's attitudes towards our faith. Our reassertion of the authority and power of the church is not the way to reach the hearts and lives of people. Our raising crosses is not what will save the church or what is precious to us. What is required is that we are willing to carry our crosses. What is required is that people have the integrity between what they say about the love of God and the love of neighbor and what they actually put into practice. How much more powerful would it have been to have put the money used to construct that cross and instead support drug treatment and feeding the many unemployed and underemployed in rural Mississippi? What would it have meant to come together as a community and work together across churches to meet and serve the very people who are suffering everyday from poverty, and communicate that we as people are faith are in this with you.

Difference between Power and Authority

There is a difference between power and authority. Power carries with it ability to coerce. I am going to pull my car over and be very nice to the policeman who turns his lights on even if I am very upset. Why? Because a policeman or woman has the power to coerce me. Authority is very different. Authority is something someone earns. True authority has nothing to do with coercing someone else to do something. It has everything to do with the credibility someone gains when they time and again prove they mean what they say by what I see them do. When my youth pastor gave me his only raincoat when I realized I had left my rain coat at home and there was a cold rain, he gained authority in my life. When I found out that he gave 30% of what he had for the sake of other, he gained authority in my life. I knew he meant what he was preaching.

Tony Campolo: Mothers and Fathers

Tony Campolo says, "I hear mothers and fathers say to me: "My son, my daughter doesn't listen to me anymore! When I talk about God, when I talk about scriptures, they roll their eyes and say 'Do we have to listen to this? 'They just don't listen!" I say it's because you don't have authority. "What do you mean I don't have authority?" Well, the kids see you spend \$500 for a ticket to go a football game and throw \$5 into the offering plate for the poor. When you talk about God, that kid knows it isn't serious. After all, you would have sacrificed in love if it was serious. That is our true power as parents, isn't it? It comes when we live true, with integrity, the faith, and the values we proclaim. Your kids are going to remember what you did, not what you said.

Illustration: Mother Teresa and the City Meeting

There was a city that had a state hospital for people who were emotionally and mentally disturbed. They decided that what was really needed was to build some step-down, half-way houses, to help these hurting people reintegrate to the communities. But this required the city to make some redistricting decisions. When it came time for the city council to meet, 500 people crammed into the room, all wanting to make a protest as to why they did not want these people near their neighborhoods. They were afraid and wanted to keep these people far away from their home and not risk hurting their home values. Without much objection from other citizens, the city council voted unanimously to not allow the rezoning requested for the half-way houses.

No sooner had they voted that the back doors of the auditorium were opened and in came Mother Teresa. She was in town for a ceremony dedicating a Sisters of Charity program and she heard about this meeting. She came down the center aisle and everybody gasped as Mother Teresa came to the front, got down on her knees in front of the city council, raised her arms and said, "In the name of Jesus, make room for these children of God! When you reject them, you reject Jesus. When you affirm them, you embrace Jesus." And then with her arms upraised, five times in a row she said, "Please, please, please, please, please, in the name of God, make room for these people! Make room for them in your neighborhoods."

Now, you're on the city council, the television stations have followed Mother Teresa into the place and they're grinding away. The newspaper reporters are there. There is Mother Teresa on her knees in front you. What are you going to do if you're on the city council? You guessed it! "I move we change the decision." And then a second to the motion and they voted unanimously to reverse the decision they had made a few minutes earlier. The newspapers reporting on this the next day said the most remarkable thing is that of the five hundred plus people packed into that hall, not a one of them uttered a word of opposition to the motion. Why? Because of Mother Teresa. She spoke as one having authority. Where did she get that authority? On the streets of Calcutta, loving, sacrificing for the poor and the oppressed of the world, giving of herself to meet the needs of others sacrificially. Sacrificial love earned her authority.

Closing

So what we need is more people like Nate, people who have integrity. Our authority in our personal lives and our corporate life will only be gained by doing what is right and being willing to sacrifice for it. That would be like Jesus, who lay down His life for friends who abandoned Him; for Jesus who taught love of the enemy and then prayed for their forgiveness even when dying a brutal death on one of their crosses. Forget the words. Just walk the walk. Amen.