

Philip found Nathaniel and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus from Nazareth. Nathaniel said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Can anything good come of Nazareth! I just love the open honesty of our Gospel writers concerning the humanness of the people in their lives, even their own apostles. You would think, as is done so much in journalism today, that they might try to slant the account to paint Jesus' followers in a nothing but a positive light. But it is refreshing that they did not.

And as a result we hear about Nathaniel making a very negative comment about the people of Nazareth. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" For some reason he has a prejudice about the people from that city. Perhaps there was a lot of crime in that city, perhaps there was a different class of people, perhaps that city was always torn with conflict and scandal and corruption. We will never know. The only thing we know for certain is that we have Nathaniel making a discriminatory remark.

Whether it is 2000 years ago or today, we all know that prejudice, racism, and discrimination are deeply rooted in society. Now I am not a great historian, but I have always found it interesting that over the last 100 years of history that society has always found a scapegoat to discriminate against. And the object of the discrimination often changes as society realizes there are no rationales, or good reasons to be prejudiced anymore against that group. While some prejudice often remains against a group, the larger societal discrimination changes to a new group.

So follow along with me as I use the biblical language used by Nathaniel to take you through a brief history of the last 100 years.

Can anything good come from Irish immigrants?
Can anything good come from Italian immigrants?
Can anything good come from a woman?
Can anything good come from a Jew?
Can anything good come from a German immigrant?
Can anything good come from a Japanese immigrant?
Can anything good come from a divorced person?
Can anything good come from a black person?
Can anything good come from a Hispanic person.
Can anything good come from a person who is gay?
Can anything good come from an Islamic person?
Can anything good come from a person on Welfare.
Can anything good come from an illegal immigrant?
Can anything good come from a politician?

And the church is not immune from all of this prejudice and discrimination – after all, all I have heard from almost everyone in this church for the last 26 years is, "Can anything good come out of a NY Yankee fan!? Yea, I know, you're all still waiting!

Racism, prejudice and discrimination are all learned. Sometimes it is passed on from person to person or generation to generation. But usually it starts with a bad experience someone has with a person who is in some way different. It then gets generalized to everyone who is in the same category as that first offender. Sometimes it's caused by people who are insecure and need to put down another person or group of people to help themselves feel superior.

Once a group of people is labeled as inferior, it is not long before someone will consider them expendable. And yet the statistics from study after study reveal that the good and bad behavior of any person in any oppressed group or minority, is no different – on a percentage basis – than the good and bad behavior of the people inflicting the prejudice.

Tomorrow is Martin Luther King Jr. Civil Rights Day here in NH – a time for us to focus on increasing our awareness about how we can change our attitudes and actions so that we can further eliminate prejudice, racism and bigotry. And it starts with education. MLK once said, "I'd like people to say that I tried to love somebody. I want them to be able to say that I did try in my life to feed the hungry, cloth the naked, and visit those in prison. Most of all, I want people to say that I tried to love ALL humanity, whether they be black or white. I want people to say I loved all humanity, whether they be black or white!!

Personally I have always been troubled by the fact that – although there are people like Martin Luther King Jr. with hearts filled with good intentions and good will that have been forever at work trying to overcome all forms of discrimination - prejudice and racism are continually rearing their ugly head. Fighting it takes a constant vigilance and a willingness to speak up and speak out in the face of it – because silence only allows it to perpetuate itself.

As Christians we have the freedom, ability and obligation to first become aware of our own prejudices, reject them, and work hard at making sure we respect the dignity of every human being. We are called to treat every person as Christ would and to teach our children and grandchildren, by word and example, to do the same.

It is up to us to offer the power of hope that MLK's commitment to love exemplified. We need to say what we believe to be true – that there is a way of being human that restricts us from the awfulness of being prejudiced. The courage of our words must be the truth of our faith – and that will stand over and against the forces of destruction – whatever those forces may be.

In the Jesus event, we have the key example for how God acts in the world: God acts through human beings. And that places you and me into unique situations! It gives us all a special opportunity, challenge and responsibility, to be effective examples of God's unconditional love of all people – and that through Christ, we can teach ourselves and the world God shows no partiality – and therefore neither should we.