

Sermon 14 January 2018  
1 Samuel 3:1-10; 1 Corinthians 6:12-20; John 1:43-51

Last week we identified two virtues that give us the vision and resolve we need to change our hearts and minds—two words: *gratitude* and *compassion*. The New York Times article argued that *willpower* is not enough for most of us to follow through on our resolutions to change. We need more than willpower to engage and exploit the tremendous forces of self-control.

We Christians believe that the first and final force of true and enduring change is the Holy Spirit. We come to God and pray, “*Create in me a clean heart and renew in me a right spirit.*” *Change my mind so I understand the truth. Change my heart so I love others as you love me.*

We know the miracle of a changed heart and mind is the work of God’s Spirit. But the change does not begin until we bring ourselves to the task—until we lay our will and our faith on the table—until we reorient our sight and release our grip on the false hopes and inferior values of a world that ignores God’s passion for a new people and a new world.

You’ve heard the story of how a community captured monkeys. They would hollow out gourds and leave a hole just large enough for a monkey’s hand. They’d place a treat or a shiny object inside the gourd and tie it to a tree. The monkey would find the gourd and reach inside for the treasure. The problem for the monkey was that while he could easily slip his hand into the gourd, once he closed his fist around the object inside, he couldn’t get his hand out. The only way the monkey could escape was to let go of what was inside the trap. What he wanted, what he clung to so desperately, made him a prisoner and took away his freedom.

Our journey to freedom begins when we open our hands and our hearts to receive the gifts of God’s love and grace. As long as we cling to the world’s false treasures, false promises and illusions of happiness we are caught in a deadly trap. Patrick DeNeen writes about the sad state of many in our society who are trapped by their lack of gratitude and their commitment to corrupted values. *Gratitude for the past and*

*obligations to the future are replaced by a nearly universal pursuit of immediate gratification.* Too many of us want what we see as soon as we see it, and we are willing to sacrifice reason and relationships to get what we want. What we lose when we are not grateful and when we do not show compassion is truly incalculable—so much is lost.

There is, however, another way, a way to real freedom and lasting change. In the company of Jesus, we learn to open our hands and slip out of the trap of worldly ways and selfish values. We open our hands and hearts as we follow Christ beyond the trap of our self-concern and small expectations; we open our hands and hearts as we learn and practice the virtues of gratitude and compassion. This morning I want to add a third word to that formula for freedom—*imagination*.

The story of Jesus' recruitment of Nathanael is unlike any other calling of the first disciples. John's first readers would have immediately recognized some of the elements of the encounter that we would naturally overlook. They would have immediately recognized the closing image and its reference to Jacob's ladder. In Genesis 28, Jacob has a dream and he sees angels descending and ascending a ladder or a staircase between heaven and earth. Angels are the messengers of God—they bring us messages from God and carry our prayers to God.

Nathanael listens to Jesus and realizes the claim he is making. Jesus is saying *he* is the open channel between heaven and earth; he is God's messenger and God's message. It has been true for centuries: Jesus is the touchstone, the clarion, and the embodiment of God's message of love and freedom.

I want to look to an earlier part of the story. Consider the different attitudes Jesus and Nathanael bring to the meeting. Philip tells his friend about Jesus and Nathanael responds with skepticism. "*Can anything from Nazareth be good?*" From the beginning we see that Nathanael is caught, captured in a world of limited expectations. His attitudes, his prejudices, and his expectations confine him to a small world of limited possibilities. He is a prisoner of little ideas about the way things are and the way things can be. Nathanael has no imagination.

Jesus on the other hand vibrates with imagination—he sees the truth of what is, but he sees beyond present limitations, over the horizon of what *is*, to what can be—even more to what *will be* in the new creation.

Jesus sees Nathanael. *“Here is a genuine Israelite in whom there is no guile, no deceit.”* Nathanael is shocked. *“How do you know me?”* Jesus responds with the cryptic words, *“Before Philip called you, I saw you under the fig tree.”* Perhaps Jesus literally saw Nathanael sitting in the shade of the fig tree, but his perception goes beyond the obvious.

Jesus truly sees Nathanael—whether it was his body posture or a depth of thoughtfulness in his eyes—Jesus catches a glimpse into Nathanael’s soul, into his character as a seeker. Jesus looks, he sees, and he has imagination. Imagination opens the portal to understanding.

The fig tree is a symbol of contemplation, a place out of the noonday sun, a still, quiet place to go to think and to pray and to think again. The fig tree is a place to daydream.

I daydream—don’t you? I have always been a daydreamer. Sometimes my daydreams are the best part of my day. Joan Chittister says this about daydreaming.

*Daydreaming is the mother of imagination.*

*To allow our thoughts to drift out beyond the structures of the world  
around us*

*is to make new ways of seeing life possible.*

*G. K. Chesterton mused, “There are no rules of architecture for a castle in  
the clouds.”*

Imagination takes us far beyond daydreaming to the real possibility of change. When God looked down at the people of Babel, the Spirit said, *“What they imagine, they can do.”* The imaginations of the people of Babel were corrupted by pride and ambition, but God’s statement is also true for every good soul seeking to do good in the world. What we can imagine, we can do. It may also be true that we can achieve *only* what we can imagine.

No scientific breakthrough was realized without imagination; evil institutions such as human slavery would never have been broken with

imagination; our hopes for a healthy planet, for clean air and clean water will not be realized without imagination; our dreams for a better society where justice rolls down like a river and righteousness like a never-ending stream will never come true without imagination.

Our imagination is an open channel for hearing the voice of God.

We all have our own Nazareth's, places where we never look for good things to come from. We have dark places and blind spots, little or large prejudices that mute our hearing of the voice of God, Nazareth's that blind us to the extravagant possible. But God is always ready to surprise us coming out of the shadows or around the corner—showing up where we never expected. Just imagine that.

We all have our Nazareth's, and we all have a little Nathanael in our hearts. I love it that Jesus doesn't speak to Nathanael as if he is a wretched sinner. He sees him as an open soul, free of deceit and guile—a seeker hungry for truth and athirst for new possibilities.

We are like Nathanael. We too can be awakened to new possibilities. Like Nathanael, we have a natural inclination to ponder life; like Nathanael our deepest desire is to know God and be part of God's vision for a new creation. We daydream of a new world and God inspires our imagination to imagine great things. Ernest Holmes writes, *"True imagination is not fanciful daydreaming; it is fire from heaven."*

Fire from heaven—I like that! Let us pray that God ignite our imagination. In Christ, what we can imagine we can do.