

A Sermon for Delmar Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“A Bit Like Nathaniel: Open in Heart and Mind”
First in a series on Who We Are
John 1:43-51
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How do you know what you know?

Really. How do you know?

Is it because someone told you, maybe? A teacher somewhere along the way taught you that the first president of the United States was George Washington... and since then you've known.

When the light turns red, you stop. It's something your dad told you when you were in the car with him and asking why he was slowing down. Or maybe... maybe you didn't ask... Maybe you just noticed along the way that this is what people do. The light turns red and people stop.

How do you know what you know?

How do you know what your favorite color is? How do you know when someone is telling you the truth? How do you know when someone loves you? Is it because of what they say? or how they act?

How do you know what you know? It's an important question... especially when it comes to deeper things... about life and truth and faith.

So how do you know? Does science have to prove it for you to know it's true? Do you have to see it to believe it? Or is your gut what you trust the most? Is what you know to be true something you sense, deep inside of you. Perhaps there's an intuition, a stirring that helps you to know what you know.

How do you know God is Love and Jesus is Savior?

Some would say, “The Bible says it. I believe it. Case closed.”

“Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” It's a beautiful song. I wish it were that easy for me, but my knowing isn't always so straightforward.

In the movie “The Lion King” there are these two characters, Timon and Pumbaa that are an animated meerkat and warthog. There's a scene where they are both lying on their backs in some African grassland, staring up at the beautiful, starry, night sky. And they have this little dialogue:

Pumbaa asks: “Hey, Timon, ever wonder what those sparkly dots are up there?”

Timon, in his confident way, says: “Pumbaa, I don't wonder; I know.”

“Oh. What are they?” Pumbaa asks.

And so Timon tells him, “They... are fireflies. Fireflies that, uh... got stuck up on that big bluish-black thing.”

Pumbaa is rather impressed with this bit of knowledge. “Oh, gee,” he says. “I always thought they were balls of gas burning billions of miles away.”

So, how do you know?

Well, for one, we have the ability to reason and think, right? The mind is given to us by the Creator to help us know... and to learn and to see what is true.

And it is so important we use it. It's important if we're at all concerned about living from the Truth rather than a lie... living from Reality rather than our assumptions. God's given us the ability to learn and to study and to grow and change in what we know, and God expects us to use it.

But that's not all we've been given. Besides the five senses we learned about in school, God has giving us the ability to see and to know other things that are true. It's the place of intuition, of emotion, that we call the "heart." And the Heart is just as important as the mind, when it comes to knowing what we know. It's in the heart, or what the Early Church Fathers called, the *nous*, that we connect with God... that we experience Truth itself.

Here at Delmar we've said that part of our identity is that we will hold together both the heart and the mind as we seek to know what we know... as we seek to live into the Gospel. Right at the beginning of our mission statement, we describe ourselves as "Followers of Jesus, Open in Heart and Mind."

In our mission statement, we recognize that the mind by itself, will never take you were you ultimately need to go. We can't think our way to God, even though thinking is critical.

And the heart by itself... well the heart can toss you back and forth, like a wave of the sea blown and tossed by the wind, to use the image from James 1.

But when they are held together... in a dynamic tension, both open, both seeking, we can come to know, and to live from, and to be transformed by a deep union with God.

There are stories of this dynamic tension all over Scripture. One of my favorites is at the very end of Luke—the last chapter. Two men are walking on their way to Emmaus. They are confused and downcast by the events of the crucifixion and rumors of resurrection.

Along the way they meet a stranger who teaches them, beginning with Moses and the Prophets about what the Scriptures said. Later that night, the eyes of their heart and mind come together in a unique alignment when this stranger breaks the bread.

After they recognize this stranger as actually the resurrected Christ, Jesus disappears.

At that moment they ask one another, "Were not our hearts burning within us while we talked with us on the road, and opened Scripture to us?"

... Open in heart and mind.

In the Gospel of John, this same theme is introduced and expanded in the very first chapter. At the end of John's prologue (the first eighteen verses), John writes, "The Law was given though Moses, Grace and Truth came though Jesus Christ."

Grace and Truth... Heart and Mind.

Then, at the end of this same chapter, we come to the story of Nathaniel we heard earlier. Nathaniel may be the disciple that best personifies this part of our identity. There is something about his story that's so similar to our collective life.

For one thing, if Nathaniel is nothing else, he's honest. He's honest in his doubts and honest in his seeking. In fact, his first recorded words are those of a skeptic.

His friend Philip tells him that they've found the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. His first response is, "Nazareth! Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

You can tell right away that faith isn't going to be easy for him. Earlier, Andrew, Simon Peter, and Philip all responded right away to Jesus. He invited them to follow and they went with him... without questions.

Nathaniel is a different story. He's going to have to work through his questions along the way. He's going to be honest about them. In fact, that's the first thing Jesus says about him. When Jesus saw Nathaniel, he said, "There is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit."

Nathaniel was honest. He was true to himself. True to his questions. But the key to this story is to see that his honesty wasn't just the means of skepticism. It was also his honesty that leads him to faith.

You see, there's nothing impressive, nothing courageous or special about being a skeptic who's decidedly skeptical... who's closed and mistrusting. It's a lot easier to dismiss faith altogether because of the questions you have... or the uncertainties you've discovered... than to keep wrestling with the questions long enough to live into the deepest truths. There's not much honest about a dismissive skeptic.

But Nathaniel was honest enough to also be open in heart and mind. He was honest enough to follow Philip's invitation to "come and see" what he has not known.

Now, even when he encounters Jesus, he still has questions. He's still working things out. So, after Jesus makes that statement about Nathaniel being the honest type, Nathaniel asks, "How do you know me?"

Which is to say, "You don't know me. We've just met. You can't possibly know all that is in me. You don't know my joys and my fears... You don't know the road I've been down. So please, don't presume you do."

Jesus' response is really quite simple: "I... saw... you. While you were under the fig tree, before you were called to me, I saw you."

In the Gospel of John, the language of sight and blindness, of light and dark, are always soaking with meaning. Jesus' words are reminiscent of what we read earlier from Psalm 139. It's no wonder that the Lectionary pairs this gospel passage with this psalm.

Jesus is telling Nathaniel, "Before you came to me, before you heard of me, I have seen you and known you... in the depths of who you are."

Nathaniel has been asking his questions. Now something deep within him is stirred by Jesus' words. With his mind and heart open... he encounters the Truth. He sees that... and is willing to step past his skepticism into faith. "You are the Son of God," he says. "You are the king of Israel."

Nathaniel's heart and mind are aligned and he sees the beginning of the truth.

This kind of seeing, of knowing, is sometimes called "third-eye seeing." It's the way mystics of our faith have come to see and know some of the deepest truths embedded in the gospel—not just propositional truths... but transformational truth.

R. Rohr describes this by explaining that the mystics don't reject the first eye, the first eye being thought or sight. "The senses matter to them, but they know there is more. Nor," he writes, "do they reject the second eye (the eye of reason, meditation, and reflection); but they know not to confuse knowledge with depth, or mere correct

information with the transformation of consciousness itself... The mystical gaze builds upon the first two eyes—and yet goes further.”

That happens when the heart and mind and body are simultaneously open and nonresistant. “It is experienced as a moment of deep inner connection.”¹

It’s what Nathaniel experiences in this encounter with Jesus. But Jesus tells Nathaniel that this is just the beginning. “You will see heaven open,” Jesus says, “and angels ascending and descending on the ‘Son of Man’”

Nathaniel, being a true Israelite, knows his Scripture. He hears Jesus say that and immediately his mind is at work again. He starts thinking about that story in Genesis 28.

It’s the story of Jacob running for his life from his brother Esau. Jacob has stolen his brother’s birthright. He’s stolen their father’s blessing and now he’s on the run.

On his first night as a fugitive, Jacob has a dream of a ladder coming down from heaven with angels ascending and descending on it. It is in this dream that Jacob hears God voice and receives God’s covenant promise. When he awakes, Jacob says, “Surely the Lord is in this place... and I did not know it. This is none other than the house of God. And this is the gate of heaven.”

Nathaniel knows this story. He gets it. Jesus is the gate to heaven... And as he follows this Rabbi, this Messiah, the heavens... the realm of God, the deepest reality will be open to him.

This is the first week of a series we’re doing on “Who We Are.” We’re going to be naming some things about our identity as a church. We’re beginning with the phrase “Open in Heart and Mind” because we’re a bit like Nathaniel.

We’re a church that’s committed to being honest and open in our seeking of God. We’re committed to engaging our hearts and minds as we follow Jesus... because we are hungry to know what is more real than those who simply follow their emotions... and we are hungry to see what is more true than the closed skeptic is willing to see.

How do we know what we know? We are followers of Jesus, open in heart and mind.

It means we don’t all think exactly the same. It makes a diverse place. We don’t force a mold around here. But with our minds and hearts open, we are following this Jesus that we might see the heavens open... that we might live into the very realm of God... and be changed.

Amen.

¹ Richard Rohr, *The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics See*, 28.