

**Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa  
Sunday, January 15, 2012 – Elizabeth Bryce**

**Readings: Psalm 139  
John 1: 43-51**

**Sermon: A Gospel for Cynics (Epiphany 2)**

Two women sat on the porch of a family cottage, one a younger woman, the other her much more experienced grandmother. They were discussing a particular member of their family, a man whose mistakes and poor choices had led to various problems for the extended family.

“He’s just no good,” said the younger woman, “he’s not trustworthy, he’s lazy and he has no respect for anyone.”

“My, yes, he has his problems,” said the grandmother as she gazed out at the lake, and the beautiful sunset. “But I still believe that Jesus loves him, and that gives me a lot of comfort.”

“I’m not too sure of that,” said the younger woman, “Jesus cared about justice and compassion, and treating others with respect. I don’t think my cousin has any concern for others!”

“Well, of course Jesus loves him,” replied the grandmother, “Of course Jesus loves him.” They rocked in silence for a few thoughtful moments. The younger woman was reflecting, and quietly impressed and humbled by her elder’s faith. She marvelled at the wisdom that came with long life experience.

And just then the grandmother added: “Of course, Jesus doesn’t know him like we do...”

Let’s hear it for the cynics! They are the ones who push us to the boundaries of our faith – they ones who really force us to think things through. Sometimes it’s a wonder to me we do have cynics in church – what with all the unconditional love, and leaps of faith and the invitation to trust God. It just doesn’t seem like the kind of place where a cynic would feel at home. And yet there are many Christian cynics – maybe even a particular gospel message for cynics.

In the modern day definition of a cynic, someone coined a few phrases that express the cynical attitude, but in a humorous way.

- If you think nobody cares about you, or if no one knows you exist, try missing a couple of credit card payments.
- Two wrongs are only the beginning.
- A clear conscience is usually the sign of a bad memory.

- 42.7 percent of all statistics are actually made up on the spot.

If those observations fit your experience of the world, you just might be a cynic! You might be a cynic all of the time. You might only be a cynic some days. Or you might be a cynic in certain places, or only in relation to some people. A CYNICAL attitude is one that reminds us that life experience can be a harsh teacher. Life does not always live up to our expectations, so sometimes we find ourselves revising our expectations down.

In our gospel story today, we meet one of those cynics in the early Christian church, and we have the opportunity to listen in on his encounter with Jesus. His name, according to the gospel of John, is Nathanael. There are only two brief references to a disciple named Nathanael in the Bible, both of them in the gospel of John. So, if you went to one of those traditional Sunday Schools as a child and you had to memorize the names of the twelve disciples, you might well be scratching your head because you probably don't remember a Nathanael! When the other gospels list the twelve disciples, they leave out Nathanael and mention a Bartholomew in his place. It is speculated that maybe the Bartholomew listed in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke was actually the same disciple, but no one really knows.

In fact, the name, Batholomew actually reflects the old Hebrew formulae of adding "bar" at the beginning of the father's name, meaning "the son of". So perhaps this unknown disciple was only remembered as Bar-tholomew because he was the son of someone much more memorable. He might have been known simply as the "son of" Tholomew. You have to admit, those are the kinds of life experiences that can make a person pretty cynical about their place in the world. Maybe Nathanael became a cynic, because no one remembered his name!

In any case, Nathanael is best known as the "disciple" who coined this quotation: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" This was in response to an invitation by his friend, Philip, to come and travel back to Galilee alongside Jesus. Philip is a believer, soon to become a disciple of Jesus, who seems to have been on a kind of spiritual quest. The gospel presents him as a kind of spiritual eager beaver – someone who has gone out of his way to find the right teacher or a great mentor, maybe even the messiah, to answer his spiritual hopes and longings. No one had trouble remembering his name!

In contrast, Nathanael was the one who sits back and scoffs at all the enthusiasm which Philip brings to his journey of faith. "Come and meet Jesus, the son of Joseph of Nazareth," Philip says, practically jumping with joy, "We think he might actually be the one to fulfil the law of Moses and the words of the prophets!"

"Oh, come on!" scoffs Nathanael, "**Can anything good come out of Nazareth?**" He was telling Philip that he must be off his rocker. Perhaps Nathanael knew his prophecy so well that he knew the messiah was supposed to come from Bethlehem, not Galilee. Or maybe he had some particular local grudge against Nazareth, sort of like the rivalry between Dog River and Wullerton on the sitcom Corner Gas. Perhaps, as a Galilean

himself, Nathanael just didn't believe that anything holy could be found in the kind of place where he himself had grown up. Perhaps he was most cynical about God's ability to do anything significant with someone just like him.

Most people would say that Nathanael was cynical because he just didn't care anymore. The hopes of Israel had become such a disappointment that he had lost faith. But I think there was more going on with Nathanael. I believe that he cared passionately about God's work among the people of Israel. As a good Israelite, he longed for God to redeem

Israel. He longed for God to send a messiah who would lead the people into a new creation. And yet he suffered only disappointment. Prophets and preachers wandered throughout Israel proclaiming that the messiah was coming, yet Israel still suffered in Roman chains. It's no wonder Nathaniel was becoming jaded. And yet, if he had lost ALL hope, why did he go to meet Jesus when all Philip promised was: "come and see"?

Sometimes there is still a spark of curiosity in the heart of the cynic, an honest ability to question our beliefs. It reflects not disbelief, so much as a faith that has the deep courage to ask really tough questions, a faith that explores every option before it takes that leap based on trust or hope.

This seems to be the kind of honest seeking, the kind of tough-minded challenge and integrity that Jesus immediately recognized in Nathanael. Even though Philip invited Nathanael to come and see Jesus, the gospel suggests that it was Jesus really saw Nathanael first. Jesus saw Nathanael even before Philip decided to invite Nathanael along as well. Yet Jesus did not approach Nathanael the cynic directly. He waited for Nathanael to come to him, to express his cynicism about God at work in ordinary people like them. Then Jesus affirmed Nathanael's questions.

"Here truly there is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Jesus proclaimed his faith in Nathanael before Nathanael even had a chance to open his mouth and proclaim his LACK of faith. Even if the gospel writers couldn't remember Nathaniel's name, or lost the train of his story, Jesus knew that Nathanael was a person of deep faith and courage, not just in spite of, but actually BECAUSE of his cynicism. And once Nathanael heard that his questions and uncertainty and disappointment in God and in God's people were being affirmed – the spark of faith bloomed again. I believe it was because he knew his that questions and his doubts and his longing for a true God were valued. Jesus as much as said: because you have gone the distance with your questions, you will go the distance with your faith.

Some of you might have noticed that there was a front page article in the Ottawa Citizen about the role of religion and religious groups in the public school system this week. I noticed because one of the examples cited was the role of volunteer pastoral care workers, who are assigned to local high schools to provide a kind of spiritual resource to the school community, which is why I go spend some time at Ridgemont High once a week.

And hats off to David Sherwin (here today?), the Chair of the coordinating committee for that group. When he was contacted by a reporter to comment on criticism by a school Trustee, he didn't get all defensive and try to put down the Trustees questions. He affirmed that we **welcome** the chance to have this discussion about what is an appropriate religious resource to have in the schools. We **welcome** the opportunity to have this discussion with the school board, and in public in general. Because if people have questions, that means there's something going on for them – something that has value or meaning enough that they are willing to ask the question, and improve the system.

I believe the church, this congregation, the Christian family, has evolved to a place where we are not a place for easy believers alone, a place just for the eager beavers of Philip's faith. We are also a place where questions can be asked, and where cynics are welcome to seek the gospel message that Jesus has for them. Our gospel reading today suggests that that has **always** been a part of Christ's challenge to the people of God.

Jesus' insight gets past our defenses to speak to our deepest and most skeptical longings. He reminds us that we were designed and created with freedom and dignity. We have been given talents, and personalities and life experiences that can be shaped for a purpose, and a vision of life that gives life. Our lives mean more than the easy gratification of our wishes. We struggle for meaning and hope, and Jesus affirms our courage in the face of that struggle. As God's people, we are cherished, loved and adored, whether we are cynic or saint – whether we are cynic AND saint. The gospel is good news for those who have the courage to come and see. Amen