

## Using God Judgment

**John 1:43-51**  
**February 18, 2024**

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Pastor Dave Carlson**

There was a guy named John who, shortly after moving to a new house, discovered he was the only Protestant living in a large Catholic neighborhood. On the first Friday of Lent, John was outside grilling a big juicy steak on his grill. Meanwhile, all the neighbors were eating tuna fish for supper, in keeping with the Catholic observance of Lent.

This went on every Friday, week after week. On the last Friday of Lent, his neighbors got together and decided that something had to be done about John. He was tempting them to eat meat during Lent!

They decided to see if John would consider becoming Catholic. Not being very religious and wanting to please his neighbors, John said sure, why not.

So, they took him to church and the priest sprinkled some water over him and said, "You were born a Baptist, you were raised a Baptist, and now you are a Catholic."

Everyone was so relieved. No more temptation during Lent. But the first Friday of Lent the very next year found John outside again grilling a delicious steak.

The neighbors couldn't believe it and marched over to confront him. As they entered his backyard, they saw John with a stake on the grill and a water pitcher in his hand. Sprinkling water over his steak, John was heard to have said, "You were born a cow, you were raised a cow, and now you are a fish."

That's a funny story. It's also a story about being too judgmental of others, and about just maybe changing your perspective on things once in a while. That's what our New Testament lesson is about – judging others and the opportunity to change your life by changing your mind.

Jesus has just been baptized by John in the Jordan River, tempted by Satan in the wilderness, and now he's returning to Galilee, his home turf, to bring together his ministry team.

Scripture tells us Jesus "found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.'" Philip then finds Nathanael and says, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathanael says, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip replies, "Come and see," set aside your disbelief, your opinion and take a look for yourself.

How did Philip know Jesus is the Messiah? We don't know, but it was certainly a judgment call, with not much evidence to support it. What's more, when Philip says, "We have found

him...,” that’s not exactly true. Scripture clearly says Jesus found Philip. Interesting how our perception of things can be a little off, right, and that can make all the difference in the world, putting ourselves ahead of Jesus!

Oh, and then there’s Nathanael. When Nathanael hears Philip saying the Messiah comes from Nazareth, he says to Philip, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

So much judgment and presumption. It makes Nathanael quite skeptical. And, if the Gospel of Matthew is correct where it says of Jesus, “He will be called a Nazarene,” Nathanael is also missing out on what scripture says about the most important person to ever walk the earth.

What do we miss out on when we misjudge people, when we fail to take in all the facts, when we refuse to reconsider our beliefs when others clearly believe something completely different?

That’s pretty much the state of our world right now – people judging and misjudging all kinds of things, people dug in when it comes to their opinions, people of good conscience not allowing others to hold a different point of view.

It’s just not Christian. It’s just not faithful – as in having faith in God. And it’s just not helpful – as in helping each other find our way forward toward the best possible decision, the best outcome.

Look, none of us is perfect. This is why in the Presbyterian faith we look to the Holy Spirit to guide us in our discernment, in deciding the best path forward, the most faithful choice to make.

And we do that, not as individuals, but as groups, as committees and boards discussing and considering different opinions before coming to a decision. And once the decision is made, everyone stands behind it, even if it didn’t go their way, my way.

We have faith in the process and we have faith in the grace of God. And our faith tells us that even if a wrong decision is made – which happens sometimes – it is more important to honor the process than it is to be right all the time, more important to respect one another and show a little grace, a little faith.

As I said, none of us is perfect, except Jesus, of course.

This is why, when Jesus sees Nathanael coming toward him – even after Nathanael disses him saying, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” – Jesus doesn’t take offense, but rather, he gives Nathanael credit for speaking his mind and he gives him the benefit of the doubt. Thoughtfully and graciously, Jesus responds, saying, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” someone who speaks his mind openly and honestly in search of the truth.

We could learn a lot by responding like Jesus when there's a difference of opinion. For Nathanael, Jesus' response leads to the greatest knowledge, the greatest faith there is – that Jesus is “the Son of God!” as Nathanael declares, and the “King of Israel!”

Jesus is the beloved sent by God to bring peace and blessing where there is fighting and condemnation. Jesus is here to lead us and guide us through the power and wisdom of the Holy Spirit, when people fail to give each other the benefit of the doubt, when people fail to trust that God will make things right, when people refuse to rethink their choices and opinions, even and especially when they're being stubborn and confrontational.

One of the key reasons we get so stubborn and confrontational is we can't stand being wrong. For too many people, being wrong is unthinkable, untenable; they just can't and won't consider that someone else might be right, let alone admit it, even to themselves. And that leave little room for God to work through the situation. So, nobody wins and everyone loses.

But there is a way to get past our need to be right, our refusal to admit we might be wrong, our inability to see it when we've based our life – our sense of self - on a shortsighted, stubborn choice or belief.

To see your way past such misguided and positional choices, consider the following spiritual lesson, titled “Moments of Connection” by Rabbi David Wolpe. Teaching about repentance and having a change of heart, Rabbi Wolpe says, “One of the great things about repentance is that it doesn't only change the future, it changes the past: because if you become a different person, then all those mistakes and regrets and anguish – instead of sadnesses they become stepping-stones to the new person that you have created inside of yourself ....”

In other words, deciding you've been wrong isn't the worst thing in life – having to be right is. Having to be right and refusing to consider different opinions gets you nowhere. It closes you off from making thoughtful and faithful decisions.

Whereas allowing others to have a say, letting them take the lead from time to time, trusting in God to make things right, and giving each other the benefit of the doubt and a little grace, that leads you to growth and blessing as someone who claims Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, someone willing to come alongside others of good conscience to discover and receive the guidance and blessing of the Lord. Amen

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, who calls each of us to ministry, we give you thanks that you empower us with all that we need, and yet we admit our complacency and doubt.

Can we really be the ones on which you are building your church? Are we really “gifted enough” for the task to which you call us? Do our efforts have any effect whatsoever, given the reality of despair and grief in our world, and in our own hearts?

And at the core of our being, we admit to being haunted, sometimes, by Nathanael’s question: Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Are the stories really true? Are you real? Are you there? Are you who you say you are?

In this cacophony of questions, the answer comes simply: “Follow me. Come and see.” O Lord, help us to follow. Give us eyes to see through the fog of our endless questioning and paralyzing doubts. Lead us to a place beyond questions, where we can live in trust and faith. Lead us as your disciples.

We pray also for those most impacted by the fears, the doubts, the struggles, and the tragedies of life. Especially on this day we pray for the victims of senseless violence. Bring healing and comfort to those who have suffered injuries. We pray for the health and wellbeing for those dealing with medical issues and health limitations and struggles. We pray for peace and comfort for nearing the end of their earthly lives as they draw ever nearer to Jesus. We are bold enough to pray for these things knowing your desire to provide them, even as we know and love and serve the Lord Jesus whom you set to deliver the world from all pain and suffering. We join our hearts and our voices in prayer, using the words that he taught us, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.**

**Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.**

**For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**