

**Homily preached by The Reverend Dr. Edward L. Wheeler,  
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“Wrestling with the Big Questions”

Conference of the Episcopal Church

Text: John 1: 43-51

*Theme: “A Lesson on How to Wrestle with the Big Questions”*

*Foreward*

Giving honor to God, to Bishop Waynick, Conference Coordinator Paula Franck, Conference leaders and attendees, honored guests, my brothers and sisters in Christ: I am honored and humbled by the invitation to be the preacher for this important and intriguing conference for lay and clergy educators and leaders of lifelong learning initiatives. I bring you greetings from Christian Theological Seminary where I serve and which cherishes its partnership with the Indianapolis Diocese, Seabury Western Theological Seminary and the broader Episcopalian community. I pray that your conference has been a great success and will prove to be a most beneficial learning experience for everyone involved.

*Prayer*

*Introduction*

While these early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century might be described in many ways, one of the ways this century can be described is by the growing split within communities of faith around questions that are important to persons of faith. Often posed as the struggle between conservatives and liberals there appears to me to be a troubling tendency in both camps to demonize the other without being willing to enter into a meaningful conversation around the questions that divide the community of faith. I do not want to suggest that such conversations are easy nor do I believe that any meaningful conversations would result in a disappearance of what at times can be radically distinct points of view. Nevertheless, I remain convinced that persons of faith can not afford to refuse to wrestle with the “big questions” that we face.

Not to wrestle with the “big questions” is an act of faithlessness that allows us to hold onto our beliefs, convictions and biases as if they are eternal unchangeable truths without a hint of error. While there are those who may believe they alone possess the Truth, I believe that scripture teaches us to be open to God’s movement in the world and to expect the unexpected. Our text for this morning provides us with an example of how we might wrestle with big questions in such a way that we can be open to new insights about God and ourselves.

*I. A Truly Big Question*

Our text continues John’s description of Jesus calling his first disciples. Jesus “finds” Philip and invites him to follow him. Philip then seeks out Nathanael, someone we suspect Philip knows, and tells him that “we have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of Joseph.”

Despite Philip's rather engaging testimony that attests to his belief that he has found the Messiah, Nathanael is singularly unimpressed and asks Philip, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" This is a big question. It is a question that casts doubt on Philip's fundamental faith. It is a question that confronts Philip's assertion of Jesus' identity. "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" is more than a pejorative sociological assessment of Nazareth's history to produce worthwhile citizens. The question attacks the core belief that has changed Philip's life. This is a big question.

In 2006 the church still wrestles with the big question of who Jesus is. Is Jesus the Son of God unique in all of history or is Jesus a son of God who is one of a long list of persons who have modeled godliness for us. Is Jesus the one whose sacrifice has reconciled us to God and is the mediator through whom we are saved or is Jesus one of many avenues to God that are equally redemptive? The personhood and the work of Christ are big questions.

However, questions of Christology, soteriology, ecclesiology and the like are not the only big questions confronting communities of faith. Theologians, educators, clergy and lay leaders wrestle with questions about the church's role in alleviating poverty, the role capitalism plays in creating and maintaining inequities in the world, what should be the church's stance on the Iraq War, how does the community of faith address the issue of abortion and yes, how does the church faithfully respond to the question of ordination of gays and lesbians? These are not simple questions and they do not come with easy answers.

These questions much like Nathanael's question strike at the core of our beliefs, they challenge our most foundational assumptions about ourselves, our view of Christ and the community of faith we hold dear. Like Nathanael's question, these are big questions that demand answers.

## *II. Philip's Response*

Nathanael's question was not only a big question, it was a hard edged question. In a sense, Nathanael's question was a sarcastic question that dripped with innuendo and bordered on ridicule. Aimed at Philip's enthusiastic testimony, Philip could have easily been insulted and angered by Nathanael's rather callous question. It is easy to see where Philip could have reacted negatively to what could be seen as Nathanael's rather personal attack. But that is not the way Philip reacted.

In what appears to be a response steeped in a supreme confidence in his testimony, Philip says to Nathanael, "Come and see." Philip knows what happened to him when he encountered Jesus and he has no doubt that Nathanael's skepticism will vanish when he meets Christ for himself.

Philip does not seek to defend his position by trying to argue with Nathanael. Rather he invites Nathanael to investigate the validity of his testimony by meeting Jesus and seeing for himself if he is as Philip has described.

Big questions that seem to attack our most basic beliefs and convictions often elicit the most negative and emotional responses even from good people. Big questions can bring out the worst in us as we seek to defend what we see as a personal attack on us or the Lord we love. Unfortunately, we rarely see the big question as an opportunity for dialogue or mutual exploration. Unlike Philip who seemed to believe that if Nathanael had the opportunity to engage Jesus, he would discover new truth, we often act as if we are the only ones who can defend truth. Is truth really so fragile that it can not stand investigation and inquiry, dialogue and skepticism? Is the church so unsure of itself that it can not be open to the on-going search for truth and must

therefore oppose any questioning of itself, its traditions, its dogma? Is our interpretation and understanding of scripture so cast in stone that we can not discover God speaking to us in new ways?

I like Philip's attitude toward and response to Nathanael. Philip seemed convinced that Jesus could meet Nathanael at his point of inquiry and his point of need. Therefore he did not react negatively to Nathanael's question. Rather he invited him to "Come and See." What would theological seminaries, education programs and lifelong learning look like if we dared wrestle openly with the big questions, assured that those who dared wrestle would find answers worthy of the wrestling?

### *III. An Encouraging Jesus*

Nathanael raised a big question. Philip responded in a calm and inviting manner that led Nathanael to an encounter with Jesus. In that encounter Jesus did three things. First, Jesus recognized him as a person of value and worth. Jesus, upon seeing Nathanael says, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile." Jesus knew of Nathanael's skepticism. Jesus sensed Nathanael's hesitancy and reticence. However, Jesus saw him as a righteous man who was honestly seeking truth. Jesus therefore commended him and affirmed him.

The second thing that Jesus did was to demonstrate his powers in a simple way that confirmed who he was for Nathanael. Jesus did not argue with Nathanael nor did he overstate His case. Jesus simply stated that before Philip called Nathanael he had seen him sitting under a fig tree. While I am not sure of all that statement implies, it was enough to cast out Nathanael's doubt.

However, Jesus did a third thing that I believe was as powerful, if not more so than the other two. In response to the statement of faith Nathanael uttered, Jesus assured him that the best was yet to come. Jesus encouraged Nathanael to look for and expect much greater things as he walked with Christ than he had experienced or could imagine. What a glorious promise.

On this Sunday morning, I want to suggest that Jesus' encounter with Nathanael expands on the lesson we should learn from Philip's response. We need to be careful to affirm the value and worth of those who raise the big questions or whose answers to those questions are different from ours. As members of the household of faith we need to recognize others in the household as our brothers and sisters even when we are disturbed by their big questions and their answers to our big questions. We and they are God's children.

Second, there are times when we must consistently demonstrate and faithfully live out our faith instead of merely arguing over the big questions. Living out the tenets of love, demonstrating our commitment to justice through our acts, living out a spirit of meekness and humility may indeed do more to reveal truth than mere arguing. Martin Luther King, Jr. lived out and died while living out his commitment to nonviolent social change in response to the demands of the gospel. In so doing, he changed more hearts and minds than his arguments did in his lifetime.

The third thing that Jesus did that is instructive to those of us who are associated with and committed to the teaching ministry is that we must continue to invite people to continue wrestling with the big questions and to be open to God's ever greater revelations. Learning about God and wrestling with ever greater understandings of God is a lifelong endeavor. No matter how sure we may be of what we have seen and heard, there is more yet to see and know. God is so much more than we can imagine that we must accept God's invitation to continue to "Learn of Me." We

have only begun to scratch the surface of what God wants us to experience. Indeed, we only see through a glass dimly therefore we must continue to wrestle with the big questions.

As we wrestle in the days to come, here, in our schools, in our parishes, in our prayer and meditation time, may we become a more faithful community of faith. And may the day come when our wrestling with the truly big questions draws us closer to God and each other.

Amen, Amen, and Amen!!