

In the name of the Holy Trinity, one God, amen.
Please be seated.

There is a lovely little story about Pope John XXIII, the gentle leader who surprised the Roman Catholic Church by convening Vatican II. One afternoon he was visiting with a group that included a mother and her children and he said to the mother, "Will you please tell me the names of your children? I realize there are many people in this room who could tell me their names, but something very special happens when a mother speaks the names of her own children."

Now it would be most simple, of course, to credit this special power of a mother's voice to a general aura of love, and I think that is indeed implied, but I trust there is more. It seems to me that part of what is powerfully communicated, what might be radiant in the room, is also the mother's deep and intimate knowledge of her child. A possibly common name like John carries new weight when it means a very particular beloved person, a very particular beloved John, with a very particular personality. The intimation of that knowledge is powerful.

To use Pope John's words, there is indeed something very special about being known and loved up close, in the particular, not in the faraway abstract. The surprising and transformative power of being seen up close, being known up close, especially by God and Christ, is at the heart of today's Gospel story of Jesus and Nathaniel, and of course in our psalm. We are in the season of Epiphany, reflecting on the manifestation of Christ, in plain language, how the light and knowledge of God's love in Jesus Christ is known and might spread throughout the world. But today's Gospel, with its humorous and piercing story of an honestly dubious Nathaniel coming face to face with Jesus' knowledge, both of his character, as in "now there is an Israelite in whom there's no deceit," and his whereabouts, as in, "I saw you sitting under the fig tree," reminds us that before we can be ambassadors of Christ, disciples who participate in spreading abroad the good news, we might need to start with our own sort of epiphany, the deep trust that God's eye sees us and knows us clearly and fully, with light and love.

Now we may come to this suddenly like Nathaniel, or it may develop over the course of many years. Either

way, it is a core element of our faith, a core element of the light that we are called to share. Oh Lord, you have searched me and known me. You are acquainted with all of my ways. To glimpse and then to trust this truth moves us to worship, awe, and praise as we see in Nathaniel, but opening up ourselves to this truth of this knowledge, this full and loving light, does more than simply shock us. Over time, deeply trusting that we do nothing apart from the knowledge and love of God will and does change our lives in wonderful and challenging ways. To live with and out of this intimate relationship fills our lives with a transforming radiance, and it is this light that we then might share, or shed abroad as the old language puts it, with the help of the Holy Spirit.

Our traditional collect for today says this. "Grant that your people may shine with the radiance of Christ's glory, that he may be known, worshiped, and obeyed." Yet if today's Gospel story is any indicator, our part in that whole process of Christ being known, worshiped, and obeyed begins with realizing that we are already known. That Christ is, as he says when he alludes to Jacob's ladder today, a bridge spanning heaven and earth, and that through him, God is not far off, but is instead near, very near.

Rowan Williams has written a new little book called *Being Disciples*. He has a wonderful way of describing the centrality of being dependably known and loved by God. I quote him at length because I think he says it so well. "We are in a period that Saint John of the Cross might well have described in his characteristic language as a dark night for intelligence. We don't quite know what knowing is for, and we don't even know that we can know or what we can know. This affects our Christian self-understanding as well. It seems that we have lost our bearings. Now what Saint John says to us is that out of this sense of a brick wall before our intelligence, this sense of confusion and loss where our understanding is concerned, faith grows in its true meaning. It appears not as a system, a comprehensive answer to all our problems. It appears, quite simply, in the form of dependable relationship. You may not understand or have the words on the tip of your tongue, but you learn somehow to be confident in a presence, an other who does not change or go away. And that is faith, I would say, in a very biblical sense."

"In our age," Williams writes, "and in the age that lies

ahead, the faith we as Christians proclaim will need to be not a clever system but the possibility of dependable relationship. We need to point, quite simply, to the God who does not let go, to the Christ who does not run away. We first are drawn into dependable relationship with God, and then we are summoned to embody it and offer it as Christ's disciples."

Now as I understand it, there is no relationship without some knowledge of the other. This is, then, the very seed of faith of our life with God. When we as Christians embody dependable relationship, especially to those who feel abandoned or don't know who or where they are, we share the light of our faith, or at least its seed. It is remarkable, really, how fruitful one dependable and loving relationship can be.

I'd like to tell you a little story from our parish of St. Luke's in North Park. At St. Luke's we feel called to focus on creating spaces for God's grace, to form life-changing relationships with Christ and with others across lines of prejudice and privilege. To that end, we are slowly building up and organizing mentoring programs that cross old human boundaries, like Sumitra, a ministry for established Americans to befriend and support, as friends, new Americans, those often called refugees. But to be completely honest, this entire program was born out of one friendship. Here's a glimpse into what this friendship looks like.

I was visiting with one of our Congolese congregants at the hospital a couple of months ago, where she had given birth to her sixth child, a beautiful baby girl who is the first of her children to be born in the United States and not in a refugee camp where she has spent the last 20 years of her life and given birth to her previous five children. She was tired, as most new mothers are after giving birth, but when I noticed a bouquet of beautiful flowers in the room and asked who had brought them, her eyes lit up and she said her friend's name with obvious affection in her Congolese French accent. "Georgie," she said. Now I know him as George, the brilliant philosopher and financial advisor with a master's in French literature from Yale, who is the leader of Sumitra. He connected with this family initially as a way of practicing his French, but over time his steadfast friendship with them has been transformational for

him, and he wants others to enter into the same rich and challenging and joy-filled journey that he has been on, which we trust is prompted by the spirit of Christ.

Last week, all the Sumitra participants, the newly arrived families or refugees and their established American friends or mentors gathered for an epiphany dinner about one year after George began inviting others into these kinds of friendships. Over 45 people gathered at St. Luke's to eat a feast, to listen to a Congolese musician, and to reflect on the effects of relationship that might surprise the world.

Have you noticed that since we are not privileged to walk with Jesus of Nazareth in the flesh, God often mediates God's knowledge and love, and even dependability to us through others in equally surprising ways? When I first visited St. Luke's, trying to discern if Christ was indeed calling us there to this unfamiliar and in some ways scary ministry, I felt an unexpected hand grace my shoulder at the communion rail. I turned and saw the face of an older woman. I did not know her then, but I would later learn that her name is Momma Rhoda. In prayer later on that day and the next day, I felt that this woman had mysteriously embodied Christ's very welcome into that community for me and my family. It felt like a holy reassurance that Christ does indeed see us, travel with us, and invited us on this particular adventure.

Recently I sat down with Momma Rhoda over tea in her living room and I told her that story. I said that she had mediated Christ to me on that day, an important day in February almost two years ago. "You probably don't remember," I said, "But I wanted to let you know." She looked me straight in the eyes across her coffee table and she said very clearly in Dinka, as translated by her daughter who was sitting with us, "I remember," she said. "I meant it to be a blessing. I prayed it would be a blessing."

Momma Rhoda has lost several children to a brutal civil war. She worries and she prays still about her one daughter who remains in the Sudan, and the one son who ended up in Alberta, Canada, by himself for complicated immigration reasons. But every word she has ever spoken to me personally or in the women's Bible study reveals her deep trust and deep faith that we are dependably known and loved by God. The

strength of this trust fills her life and all those in our community who have the privilege of knowing her with a kind of steady, consistent, dependable light that changes lives. To follow and to serve a living God as disciples of Jesus, like Nathaniel, to offer up your very life to the one to whom it belongs, is a scary thing. But we can do it and we will be blessed along the way if we can remember that Christ, indeed, already knows us in all our limitations and our great potential, and travels with us as we seek to be disciples. Before and behind us he goes, with mercy and grace and love.