

John 1:43–51 (NRSV)

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.” Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” Nathanael asked him, “Where did you get to know me?” Jesus answered, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.” Nathanael replied, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” Jesus answered, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.” And he said to him, “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

Can Any Good Thing?

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

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Scripture: John 1:43–51

“God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.” Luke places these words on the lips of a holy man, who thanks God that he is from the right side of the tracks.

The wrong side of the tracks is a devastating place to come from. In his memoir, *Open Secrets*, Richard Lischer writes of a small rural fictional town, New Cana, Missouri, a town in the middle of nowhere, roughly equidistant but a long ways from the cities of St. Louis, Kansas City, Memphis and Tulsa. Against his will Lischer is assigned to a tiny Lutheran church in New Cana. Highly educated and with dreams of importance, Lischer pronounces his new country church insignificant. Can any good thing come out of New Cana, he says to himself.

But as in every community, whatever its size or social location, New Cana had its pecking order, too. Down in the deep underbrush along dusty dirt roads lived the bottom rung of New Cana’s inhabitants. While Lischer found the whole population lacking, those at the top of the local heap distinguished themselves from those in the underbrush—can any good thing come from down there, they asked rhetorically.

In many ways one could read Lischer’s memoir as a story of opportunities missed and painful mistakes made because he and others could not see beyond their predetermined hierarchies. They found that when you’ve predetermined the places from which no good thing can come, it becomes pretty much a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In this morning’s passage from the Gospel of John, we see that even Jesus was the object of such prejudice. In the Gospel of John we first meet Jesus down in Judean desert, at the Jordan River not far north of the Dead Sea. There John the Baptist is baptizing people. He says he’s baptizing them, waiting for Jesus to reveal himself.

The Gospel of John wants to be very clear that Jesus is greater than John the Baptist. Unlike the other Gospels, the Gospel of John does not say that John the Baptist even baptized Jesus. When Jesus showed up, John the Baptist simply recognized Jesus and testified that he was the Messiah. Once John recognized Jesus at the Jordan, Jesus calls his first disciples, the two brothers Simon Peter and Andrew.

The next day Jesus decided to go to the Galilee, and there he began calling other disciples. First he calls Philip. Philip goes to Nathaniel and tells him, “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.” Nathaniel is dubious and utters those infamous words, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Nathaniel reveals the general prejudice of his day. The religious center of gravity in New Testament Israel was Jerusalem and the temple, in Judea. [slide 1] The Galilee, in the north, was considered by many to be a backwater in comparison. Surely the Messiah, the Son of David, would come from the more significant region of Judea, probably from a well-connected and recognized family. Nathaniel mouths the standard prejudice; he doubts that the Messiah could come from the Galilee. But there’s more to it. Nathaniel himself is from the northern region, from the town of Cana. [slide 2] He doesn’t come from the prestigious area. Cana, also in the

Galilee, is not far from Nazareth, but Cana is a relatively more important city. Like some of Lischer's characters in New Cana, Nathaniel may be from what is considered a backwater area himself, the Galilee, but in his mind at least Cana is a more significant town than Nazareth. Nazareth is on the other side of the tracks, down in the underbrush. Nathaniel is certain that no good thing, or person, can come from there.

Over the time that Richard Lischer pastored in the Missouri town of New Cana he began to change. He began to realize that he didn't know as much as he thought he did. More important, he began to realize that he had underestimated the people of New Cana. He began to recognize that they were significant. And, not surprisingly, the more he realized they were significant, the more significant were his relationships with them. In the end Lischer not only learned to get along better, he actually learned from the people he had looked down on. They became his teacher.

And another thing began to happen in New Cana. It's a little harder to see only because it's not the focus of Lischer's memoir. But the people in the underbrush, on the wrong side of the tracks in New Cana came out of the shadows, too. Lischer and the upstanding townspeople, too, came to better understand, respect and value those on the margins in New Cana. Some of the most moving scenes in the book occur when sketchy characters find themselves loved and supported the rest of the people.

At this point there are a million conflicting ideas skirmishing in my head. Lischer's story is a feel good story. The underdogs come to be appreciated. The annoying know-it-all gets his comeuppance, but then he softens and learns. The crusty locals love and protect some of their even crustier neighbors. Lischer's story has things we like in our stories. People care for one another, the underdog does well and it all ends happily ever after.

I think we especially like stories when the underdog does well. Many of our great heroes came from humble or difficult beginnings and rose to the heights. Abraham Lincoln rose from an illiterate family to the presidency. Martin Luther King, Jr. came out of the Jim Crow era of segregation in Atlanta and ultimately brokered the civil rights movement with the President. A remarkably few years after that the United States elected its first black president, Barak Obama, who himself was from humble and difficult origins. In many ways these, and others like them, are feel-good stories. They testify to possibilities against the odds. They are a version of the American dream, rags to riches.

But the American Dream story is worth a closer look. There's a version of the story in which the hard worker rises from rags to riches and moves right on over to the right side of the tracks with hardly a look back. They change. They become one of the top dogs, and those who remain on the other side of the tracks, well, that's too bad; it must be their own fault. After all, if I can make it, they say, why can't they? Herman Cain came from a very poor family, attended Morehouse College, like Martin Luther King, Jr., succeeded in business, became fabulously wealthy, and in 1993 was perhaps the most influential opponent of the Clinton healthcare plan in the country. Herman Cain was a powerful opponent to a plan that would have been most helpful to the people he came from. He said it would hurt business. He had moved in at the other side of the tracks. Andrew Carnegie rose to wealth in the steel industry. He sold himself as a friend of the common man. But in truth he was hardly his workers' friend. He ordered a cut in pay for the workers and went off to vacation in Scotland. When the workers went on strike, from his vacation perch he backed a deadly action that left workers dead and the union broken. Sam Walton, another supposed proponent of the common people, made his billions in Walmart. Few

companies are known for poorer wages, poorer benefits, or more unwillingness to accept responsibility for injuries to employees hurt on the job in unsafe working conditions.

These and many, many others worked their way out of poverty, and good for them. And they are often touted as what is possible if you just try. Again, they deserve a lot of credit. They've joined the ranks of those on the right side of the tracks. But they don't have much good to say about those who are still where they came from.

Here's how it works. Some people who pull themselves up by their bootstraps. Some of these people then join the ranks of the upper class, and they look down on those where they came from. The upper class really likes these new arrivals, at least to their faces. The upper class can befriend these bootstrap people to show how open-minded and supportive they are toward those who climb out of underbrush. They can clap them on the back and congratulate them and at the same time continue to look down on people who are still on the other side of the tracks for their failure to do the same. They find great comfort in this.

But there are some people who are much more scary. Much more scary was Abraham Lincoln who remained committed to ordinary people even as he became an extraordinary leader. Much more scary was Martin Luther King, Jr., who remained committed to the causes and the people where he came from even as he gained fame and the ear of the presidency. Much more scary is Barak Obama, who rode his intellect and Harvard education to bring the fight for people to the Whitehouse when he could have ridden them to untold wealth and ease. People like them are scary because they come right into the halls of power and say not only can something good come out of Nazareth, or a poor community, or a black community, but also that there is already something good there. There are good people on the other side of the tracks.

There's a joke about a bunch of Obama's harshest critics in the congress who decided they would sit down and work things out with him. The meeting went on for a long time. But at the end, the congressmen came out of the Whitehouse sadly shaking their heads. Breathless reporters asked them, what happened? How'd it go? The congressmen said, well we seemed to make some headway for a while, but then, after all that, he was still black.

The joke cuts deeper than it may seem at first glance. Events in Ferguson and New York have reminded us that our racial problems, while obvious at the level of skin color, are far more than skin deep. The fact that Obama is black is a problem no matter what for some. But for many more the problem is that he won't buy into the idea that there's nothing worth much among African American youth killed by police in Ferguson or New York, or among black African schoolchildren kidnapped and slaughtered by Boko Haram in Nigeria, or among Jews in almost every nation who are treated as subhuman. Some of the most scary people in the world are those, like Jesus, who came from the other side of the tracks and yet refuse to forget where they came from.

Jesus, that upstart from the backwater of Nazareth, gathered crowds of eager hearers far and wide. Trouble was, he refused to leave behind those the big shots thought were trash—the poor and the sick and the powerless. Can any good thing come out of Nazareth? Can the Messiah come out of Nazareth? Well, that depends on whom you ask, doesn't it. Amen.