

“Nothing Good Ever Came Out of Nazareth” – John 1:43-51 – January 14, 2018
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Several years ago I found a video clip on the internet. It was from a television show called “Britain’s Got Talent.” I was the predecessor to the show called “America’s Got Talent.” These are types of reality shows with the purpose of finding the most talented person or act in the country. From jugglers, to dancers, to singers, to magicians – any act is welcome to audition. It’s sort of a reboot of the old talent show of the 1970’s, The Gong Show. Of course, if you’ve ever watched any of these talent-based reality shows, you know that they have just as many crack-pots as they do really gifted performers. And that’s part of the mystery of watching show, wondering just how good or bad the next act will be.

The particular video that I want to talk about was a solo act. The show always starts by giving you the performer’s back story. Here was a middle-aged man who worked as a manager in a cell phone store. He was frumpy in appearance, with a stocky build and wearing a suit that didn’t fit him very well. He had a crooked smile due to teeth badly in need of orthodontia. He told the MC that he wanted to sing, but he has always had a problem with having enough confidence. He sort of looked like the guy next door. Not someone you’d notice in a crowd. Definitely not the typical portrait of a celebrity singer. And when he announced to the three judges that he was going to be singing opera, they looked at each other with expressions of “here we go again,” expecting the man to be a flop.

Now, we’ve all done this. Made a judgment about a person with very little data to back up our assessment. We make assumptions based on nothing more than prejudices or stereotypes. If we see a very attractive young woman, we might assume she is not intelligent. We see a pudgy guy with thick glasses and acne, and presuppose he is not athletic. We watch an old woman struggle with a walker, and we assume her mind as just as slow. Sometimes we take this to extremes. We see a man with a turban on his head, and wonder if he has ties to terrorists. We notice a group of brown-skinned people speaking Spanish, and we assume they are undocumented immigrants. We observe a woman at the grocery store using food stamps, and we suppose she doesn’t work and sits at home watching television.

We all do this, and we do it on a regular basis. We make snap judgments about people based on incomplete data, and often this occurs unconsciously. We’re not thinking about it; it just happens. And because of this, we can relate to Nathaniel from our lesson out of John’s gospel. He makes a hurried conclusion about someone based on a person’s place of origin. He makes a statement about someone’s worth from nothing more than their home address.

Here’s the story. Nathaniel is sitting outside under a fig tree. Perhaps eating a meal, maybe he’s praying or meditating, or just taking a rest. He’s calm and relaxed. Suddenly his buddy Phillip hurries up to him, out of breath and obviously excited about something. Phillip begins to relate a strange tale about some itinerant preacher who was in town and was gathering disciples to him. Simon Peter and Andrew, who had been followers of John the Baptist, were now following this new guy, Jesus.

I can imagine Nathaniel taking a long look at his friend, listening very carefully to what he was hearing, especially when Phillip told him, "We found him. We found the one that Moses had talked about in the law. The one whom the prophets said would come. The one who would finally deliver the people of Israel. We found the Messiah and his name is Jesus. He is the son of Joseph." And then Phillip said the one thing that caused Nathaniel to stop listening. Phillip said, "and he comes from Nazareth."

Nathaniel had no respect for people who came from Nazareth. Nazareth was a one-stop town. It was not a place you went to, but a place you passed through on your way to somewhere else. If the Messiah was going to come to redeem Israel, he sure as heck wasn't going to come from the town of Nazareth. The whole idea was absurd. He rolled his eyes at Philip and voiced his skepticism. "Nazareth? What good ever came out of that dung heap Nazareth?" His mind was made up, based upon one tiny bit of information. There was no way this Jesus could possibly be the Messiah. No self-respecting messiah would ever reside in the town of Nazareth.

Alright. Now back to my story from the show Britain's Got Talent. Here was this frumpy, cell phone store manager coming onto the stage for Britain's biggest talent search. He wanted to be a singer, opera, no less. And from his appearance and his profession, the judges and audience had already made up their minds. They sat back in their seats, not expecting much to come from this man.

The moment of truth. The music started playing, the famous aria *Nessun Dorma* from a Puccini opera. Paul Potts opened his mouth, took in a deep breath, and began to sing. From the first note, it was obvious that this was the real deal. As he continued to sing, the camera panned onto the faces of the judges and the audience members. Shock slowly turned to joy which turned to exultation. By the end of his performance, one of the judges was in tears and the audience members were on their feet shouting in amazement. The skeptics became believers. They saw for themselves, or rather, heard for themselves, that Paul Potts was indeed who he claimed to be. An opera singer, only in need of a stage and a chance. Their preconceptions were wrong. Appearances never tell the whole story.

If we jump back to John's Gospel, and read the rest of the story, it is unclear how Nathaniel was convinced that Jesus was indeed who he said he was. Jesus didn't whip out his resume and recite to Nathaniel all his qualifications of Messiahship, but something about their encounter convinced Nathaniel that he was in the presence of the Holy One of God. Jesus was the real deal, the Messiah that had been promised, and Nathaniel believed and followed him.

But I want to go back and look a more closely at Nathaniel's presuppositions. And our own.

Our stereotypes of people not only cause us to make judgements about others, but they also impact how we treat others. We are pleasantly surprised when we encounter someone who defies expectations. We laugh with delight when a frumpy cell phone salesman actually can sing opera, and does so beautifully. As a result, we assign him worth. He is worthy of our

praise. We are thrilled when a black kid from the ghetto makes it to Harvard and becomes a successful lawyer. Or when a refugee defies all odds and becomes a life-saving doctor.

And Jesus, despite being a Nazorean, he is the Messiah, and worthy to be followed.

But what if Paul Potts couldn't carry a tune in a bucket. What if he was delusional, believing he could really sing, but was instead booed off the stage and laughed at in derision. What if he lived up to our expectation, it's okay to judge him harshly, right. He's an average schmuck with delusions of grandeur.

But what if Nathaniel had encountered a shepherd from Nazareth instead? Shepherds tended to be dirty and frumpy, and Nazareth was just a one-horse town full of losers. If Nathaniel's stereotype was actually confirmed, would he have given that shepherd the time of day? Would Nathaniel have deemed him worthy?

Last Thursday, a young woman came into the church office. She was dressed frumpily – I think that's my descriptor for the day – and wearing an old ball cap. She was loud and rude, and she asked about getting some food. We told her that the food pantry was the 1st and 3rd Tuesday of the month. She argued that she had been here just last Thursday and got food and was told she could come back. She refused to believe us and she got upset with us. As she walked out of the building, having earlier seen the security camera and the monitor in the office, she made a rude hand gesture toward the camera, as she walked out the door.

What was our first reaction? What do you think?

How would you react to her rudeness? Did she confirm a stereotype? Maybe.

Would that affect how you react to her or people like her in the future? Would her actions impact your perception of her inherent worth?

Do her actions make it harder to see her as a person who was created in God's image and who God loves just as much as God loves us?

Food for thought. Much food for thought.