

Sermon – January 17, 2021 – Epiphany 2

How do we know?

'Suddenly the 'light went on' and I understood.' Ever had that experience? Or we say 'The 'penny dropped' and I got it or something 'clicked' and 'I just knew.'

These are epiphanies...times when we grasp the meaning of something, ...often intuitively, suddenly, surprisingly through a simple event. It is as if the light goes on and we see.

This is the season of Epiphany in the church...but we could say it is the season of 'epiphanies'...many of them, not just one; times when we grasp meaning, when we understand without knowing how we know.

In this morning's Gospel there were a few epiphanies, for both Jesus and his followers. Jesus saw Philip and knew him, inviting him immediately to follow him....he also knew Nathanael when he saw him. But Philip also had an epiphany, a sudden recognition of Jesus –he knew he was the one whom Moses in the law and also the prophets had written about. Then Nathanael soon recognizes Jesus to be not only Rabbi but the Son of God! the King of Israel!"

Jesus knew people's hearts...and somehow released in those he met a similar ability to 'know'. Some call it 'thin slicing' today.

Have you heard of the book called 'Blink: The power of thinking without thinking.'? It is written by a Canadian called Malcolm Gladwell. You've maybe seen him with his dark curly hair and glasses on the National. He also writes for the New Yorker. He describes the main subject of his book as "thin-slicing": our ability to use limited information from a very narrow period of experience to come to a conclusion. This idea suggests that spontaneous decisions are often as good as—or even better than—carefully planned and considered ones.

One example he sites in his book is John Gottman, a researcher on marital relationships. After analyzing a normal conversation between a husband and wife for an hour, Gottman can predict whether that couple will be married in 15 years with 95% accuracy. If he analyzes them for 15 minutes, his accuracy is around 90%. But if he analyses them for only three minutes, he can still predict with high accuracy who will get divorced and who will make it. Surprising? This is one example of when "thin slicing" works.[5] And to be honest, it doesn't always work.

The Blink book also includes studies of Paul Ekman, a psychologist who created the Facial Action Coding System (FACS). It indicates that a lot of "thin slicing" can be done within seconds by unconsciously analyzing a person's fleeting look called a microexpression. Jesus was very good at 'thin slicing'...at knowing others without the usual means of knowing. And his knowing others caused them to in turn know Jesus, but also to know themselves in a different way.

Just for example, Philip and Nathanael saw themselves differently once they became friends with Jesus and his followers. When you realize your identity as a follower, a disciple, and get a glimpse, perhaps a new glimpse — and here is the epiphany — of something you have

not seen before when it comes to your own faith story, your own discipleship, your own concept of what it means to believe.

This 'knowing', this thin slicing, this intuition is there for us as we find it in today's Gospel. Our God certainly knows. We are assured as in today's Psalm that we are searched and known...intimately, lovingly, even before we were formed in the womb. There is nowhere we can go where God isn't, even to the ends of the earth. I think of Fayette's baptismal story last week. As she came to our Lord, she found a new identity as a 'beloved, precious child of God, beautiful to behold.' And so we find this is who we are too. And in this identity, as beloved children of God, we reach out to others...we quench our thirst to 'know' others...to be connected...to love...because we do know in our every fibre that 'God is love' and so God is there in our connections.

Jesus ends our Gospel reading by saying heaven will be opened and the angels of God will be ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. In Greek, the word angels is the word for messengers. So Jesus' image is of the heavens opened and messenger angels going back and forth constantly. Imagine! Are we aware at all? There must be messages all the time. Maybe we have all had mini epiphanies as a result of a divine message from an angel disguised as a cashier at the supermarket, a friend on the phone, a song, a pan handler even? Epiphanies which help us know God is right here and that we are held fast by God. Amen.

