

**Prickly**  
**January 14, 2024**

Before I begin my sermon, I'd like to share a disclaimer. I'm going to talk about most of our readings, but I won't touch on 1 Corinthians. If you hear this reading from 1 Corinthians and it makes you uncomfortable, I'd love to talk to you about it. If you hear this reading and you love it and want to base your life on it, I'd love to talk to you about it. This reading was ever present in my life as I was growing up, and not always in a good way.

The past couple of weeks have been rough in the VanBuren house. There have been lots of germs making their rounds; water has been coming into the house from above and below. But the kicker is that Coraline, our dear 2-year-old daughter, has decided that she doesn't need sleep.

So Coraline has been a little Samuel. In the middle of the night, when the nightlight had not yet gone out, Coraline calls out "Daddy! Daddy!" And Daddy shows up and says (somewhat grumpily), "Here I am, for you called me. What do you want?" A request is made (for a song, a hug, a stuffed animal), the request is granted or denied, and Daddy says, "Go, lie down again."

A second time, a call is made. This time: "Mommy! Mommy!" Mommy walks in, "Here I am, for you called." And so on, maybe a third time, a 7<sup>th</sup> time.

As your priest, I feel obligated to be completely honest with you: I am not my best self at 3 am. I have denied (harshly) to sing a song to a crying 2 year-old. And you'd be amazed at how angrily you can say the words, "I love you. Go to sleep."

And just to throw her under the bus, my wife is also not her best self at 3 am. She's better than me for sure, but not her best self.

We all have moments like that, where we could do a little better, don't we? Nod your heads yes. We all get frustrated, or short, or downright angry, and we all (at times) take that anger or frustration out on an innocent bystander.

Just look at Nathanael. We don't know much about Nathanael. He's only mentioned here and at the end of John's Gospel. But I'll tell you what: Nathanael is a prickly pear.

His buddy Philip says, "Hey! We've found the man who is fulfillment of Scriptures: Jesus of Nazareth!"

There are a lot of great possible responses to that.

"Wow, how exciting!"

"Let's go meet him?"

"How do you know he's the one?"

"Have you told anyone else?"

Instead, Nathanael goes with, "Pff. Nazareth? Only losers come from Nazareth. More like Spazareth."

But Good Guy Philip is undeterred. He earnestly invites Nathanael to meet Jesus, saying, “Come and see.”

And they go to meet the man, the Messiah, the one about whom Moses spoke. Jesus, seeing Nathanael approaching, says, “Ah, this guy. You are a faithful Israelite, full of truth!”

Again, lots of possible responses Nathanael could give.

“Thank you, Jesus!”

“Did Philip tell you about me!”

“You’re too kind!”

Nathanael’s actual response? “Why do you think you know me? You don’t know me!”

A prickly pear, this Nathanael, if ever there was one. He must be having a rough day. His daughter kept him up all night.

But like Philip, Jesus is unshaken. He gives an earnest answer to this very rude question. “I saw you under the fig tree.”

And man, if Nathanael isn’t blown away. All sarcasm, all snottiness falls away, and Nathanael is stunned. “You must be the Son of God, the king of heaven!”

And Jesus chuckles and responds, “You ain’t seen nothing yet.”

The question of course, is what on earth is the fig tree about? What was Nathanael doing? He must’ve been alone for him to be so stunned that Jesus saw him. Was he praying? Was he crying? We don’t know.

Here’s my theory. This is purely Andrew’s speculation, based on this very limited story and what we know of Nathanael. I think that Nathanael was angry under the fig tree (which isn’t much of a stretch). More than that, he was irate.

I imagine Nathanael yelling at God, furious, shouting, “Look at this world, God. Look at the mess it has become. Look at how we are oppressed. Where are you, God? Where is your Messiah? Where is the one that we’ve been waiting for? Are you just going to abandon us? Do you not see me, God?”

And then when Jesus tells Nathanael, “I saw you under the tree,” Nathanael knows that his prayers have been answered and this Jesus is the one. That’s my theory.

In any case, we have a very grumpy grump in Nathanael, and both Philip and Jesus accept him. They don’t get sucked into his grumpiness; they just say to him, “In your grumpiness, God is here.” Namely, through this guy Jesus.

God is present in those moments when we are feeling a bit prickly. God knows us, and God accepts us.

“Lord, you have searched me out and known me;  
you know my sitting and my rising;  
you know even my thoughts.  
You know my travels and my rest stops;  
you are familiar with everything about me.  
You even know my words before I say them.”

The good words... and the bad words. And our thoughts — the encouraging ones; the mean ones; the hopeful ones; the racy ones; the pleasant ones. God knows them all.

AND God loves us.

Sometimes I think that we are our own harshest critics. Because we know our thoughts and motivations too. We might kick ourselves mentally and say things like,  
“I shouldn’t have gotten angry.”  
“I can’t believe I said what I did. She must think I’m an idiot.”  
“He deserves someone better than me.”

We criticize ourselves for how we act or look or speak or even feel. Sometimes we might even think that if someone knew us, really knew us, they would find us unlovable.

But Psalm 139 is the reminder that the opposite is true. The more someone knows you, the more that person love you (for the most part; you can’t make everyone happy).

And for those hyper-self-critical moments, we have verse 12: “I will thank you, God, because I am marvelously made.” That’s a line to paste above the mirror! I may not be perfect, but I am marvelously made by God.

God knows us, and God loves us, even if we struggle to love ourselves. Even in our Nathanael moments, when we are as prickly as can be.

And if that’s true, if God loves us for all that we are: our talents, our weaknesses, our struggles, our shame, then there is nothing you can do that will make God love you any less. Because God already knows you inside and out.

Good news from Nathanael the prickly pear and Psalm 139.

I’ll close with a short story, but before that, a disclaimer:  
I didn’t talk about this passage from 1 Corinthians. If you hear this reading from 1 Corinthians and it makes you uncomfortable, I’d love to talk to you about it. If you hear this reading and you love it and want to base your life on it, I’d love to talk to you about it. This reading was ever present in my life as I was growing up, and not in a good way.

Final story, which may or may not be true. In the 1660s, a man named Oliver Cromwell was ruling England. He wasn't a king, but his title was Lord Protector of the British Empire.

As was the custom, a painter was hired to capture the likeness of Cromwell. The tradition of the day was for the painter to flatter the ruler by painting a slightly improved version of the monarch. A slightly smaller nose, fewer pounds around the gut, fewer gray hairs — the precursor to Photoshop.

When Cromwell sat for his painting, he is reported to have said to the painter, "I desire you would use all your skill to paint my picture truly like me, and not flatter me at all; but remark all these roughnesses, pimples, warts and everything as you see me, otherwise I will never pay a farthing for it."

Over time, that order was shortened to a simple command, "Paint as I am, warts and all!"

Martin, Gary. "Warts and All." *The Phrase Finder*. Accessed Jan 11, 2024. <https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/warts-and-all.html>

Now I don't know that Oliver Cromwell is necessarily a great role model for how we should live our lives. But I appreciate his sense of candor, of accepting himself for who he was.

God made us as wonderful creations.

God knows us inside and out.

And God loves us wholeheartedly, warts and all.

Amen.

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