

Sermon Brief

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October 17, 2021

Text: John 1:43-51

Title: Wintonbury Values - Atmosphere

Subject: Transformation requires truth and transparency.

Complement: Jesus opened Himself up to an authentic seeker.

Textual Idea: As we see in Jesus' example with Nathanael, transformation requires truth and transparency.

Sermon Idea: We want to create a "hothouse" of transformation through an atmosphere of hospitality and authenticity.

Interrogative: Are we a hothouse of hospitality and authenticity?

Key Points:

1. **Hospitality:** We create spaces where people feel welcomed and valued. (Hebrews 13:1-2)
2. **Authenticity:** We encourage people to live with integrity by being honest in their relationships with God, themselves, and each other. (John 1:43-51)

What do I want people to know? I want people to know that for transformation to occur at Wintonbury, we need to create an atmosphere of hospitality and authenticity combined with the truth of God's Word.

What do I want people to do? I want people to (1) have a transparent accountability relationship, (2) change lifestyle to make space for others, (3) consider reaching out to Afghan refugees.

What need am I addressing? I am addressing the need to create an atmosphere where transformation can occur.

Wintonbury Values -Atmosphere

John 1:43-51

October 17, 2021

Diane and I had a great time on vacation two weeks ago in Minnesota. We re-visited old friends, my seminary, and reminisced about our time there many years ago. One other thing I was reminded of is a phenomenon called “Minnesota Nice.” I found this great description of it from an internet blog called Rambling Rhodes. *“There's a rule here in Minnesota, unspoken and unwritten though it may be. It is: no matter how angry, frustrated, irritated or bent out of shape you may be regarding the actions of others, you must stoically remain silent and steadfastly refuse to show any displeasure whatsoever. Oh, you ran over my foot? Twice? With a train? No problem. Off you go, you little scamp. Godspeed and good health to you. You can always tell when you're dealing with a non-native Minnesotan, because they end up speaking their mind, which is just a horrifying concept to a Minnesotan. You said what you think? How RUDE!”* Remember, that’s a Minnesotan calling Minnesotan’s out!

When we lived in Minnesota, we definitely ran into this façade of happiness all the time. And I fear that this same façade may exist in the church too. I guess you can call it, “Christian Nice.” Walk into most any church on a Sunday morning and you’ll get glowing smiles. You’ll hear, “God is good, all the time! And all the time, God is good!” There’s this whole atmosphere that everything is peachy keen! Well, that’s just not true! Everything isn’t peachy keen – but don’t talk about those things, that’s gossip! Let’s just keep doing what REM sang about in the ‘90s, “Shiny, happy people all around!” “Christian Nice,” comfortable for career Christians, but fake and off-putting to anyone walking into it – certainly not an atmosphere for true transformation.

A few Sundays ago, I presented our vision and mission: **(LCD) we want to see our communities transformed by God’s presence. We do that by seeking to help individuals and communities experience God, become more like Jesus, discover their calling, and impact their world.** What binds us together as a community on this mission are our values. Fourteen in all. I’ll be looking at them two at a time in pairs of seven. Last week, we looked at the first pair, **(LCD) Jesus and The Bible.** Together they represent our authority: we submit to the Word of God in flesh and in writing. The **(LCD) next two values**, the biggest ones on this word cloud, are hospitality and authenticity; and together, they represent our atmosphere values. **(LCD) Hospitality: We create spaces where people feel welcomed and valued. (Hebrews 13:1-2) and Authenticity: We encourage people to live with integrity by being honest in their relationships with God, themselves, and each other.**

If we’re going to create an atmosphere where true growth can occur, we need to have these values in place. When people are welcomed and valued as they are and allowed to be themselves without putting on “Christian Nice,” you create an environment for rapid growth. Kind of like a **(LCD) hothouse** for plants. In a hothouse, everything is set to create the perfect conditions for optimum growth. The same is true spiritually when you combine last week’s values with this week’s values – **(LCD) Truth plus Transparency**

equals Transformation. The truth of God’s authoritative word combined with open, honest sharing creates an environment for thriving. I like how Greg Ogden, the writer of discipleship curriculum that I’ve used for years, puts it, **(LCD) “Transformation occurs when we grapple with the truth of God’s Word in the context of transparent relationships...honesty with God is not sufficient. We give God permission to reshape our lives when we risk self-revelation and confession to others.”** Our vision is to see transformation; and that will only happen with the right atmosphere – hospitality and authenticity – or transparency if you will. Let’s talk about those two values.

Again, our hospitality value is **(LCD) we create spaces where people feel welcomed and valued.** Hebrews 12 says, *“Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.”* The writer here is referencing the passage in Genesis where three angels come to see Abraham and he immediately offers them food and lodging, as was the custom in the ancient world. Traveling was dangerous and there weren’t Comfort Inns everywhere so taking in people when they were vulnerable was essential. It’s actually pretty cool to think of entertaining angels, isn’t it?!

I don’t know about angels, but there are plenty of strangers out there needing to be welcomed. The Greek word for hospitality is interesting, **(LCD) it is philo – love and zenia – strangers – the love of strangers.** One commentary defines it this way, “The act of making strangers welcome in one’s home, caring for their needs as one would a friend.” Again, this was common and even expected in the ancient world, but not so much here and now. We largely keep to ourselves, our family, and our friends. But there are many people needing to be welcomed like a friend: the homeless, the fatherless, the spiritually wandering, the drug addicts, the refugees.

We’re going to watch a video at the end of our time showing the power of hospitality. For now, I just want us to think about how welcoming we are here at Wintonbury. Guests tell us all the time that we’re a warm church. I think that’s true – I hope it’s true. Yet, during our race conversation over the past year, we found out that many of our friends of color have not been feeling completely welcome here. Don’t get me wrong; we didn’t hear any awful stories. But what we forget is that when you’re a minority person walking into a place where everyone looks and talks differently from you, you can feel pretty devalued. I’ve heard that from people of color, but I’ve also heard that from divorced people, from people with disabilities, from former inmates, from the elderly. These minorities, though not directly ignored, need extra attention if they’re to feel welcome and valued. That’s hospitality. Overall, I do think we do good in this area, but we can do better. I mean think for a moment – when’s the last time you invited someone to lunch who is completely different from you. Welcome and value one another.

Someone who did that, obviously, is Jesus. Everyone, even sinners and tax collectors, felt safe around Him, felt they could be themselves. Everyone, that is, except the Pharisees who practiced “Pharisee Nice.” “O rabbi, you teach so well! Bless you rabbi Jesus!” The Pharisees sure knew how to play the game of niceness. But that façade kept them from experiencing transformation. Someone who did feel welcomed by Jesus, was authentic

with Him and transformed was a guy found in the first chapter of John's gospel. Go ahead and turn there, John chapter 1.

As you do, let me summarize a few background details. The apostle John was one of Jesus' best friends. He walked with Jesus, ministered with Jesus, and, eventually, died for Him. He was all-in with Jesus! Belief in Jesus is the main emphasis of John's gospel. He gets started with that task in this first chapter by proclaiming Jesus to be the "Word of God," the very truth of God. John says that Jesus came as light into the darkness of the world. In doing so, all are invited to come openly into the light. Why? Look at verse 18, "*No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.*" The mission of Jesus, according to John, is to reward those who openly come out of the darkness and into the light of Christ with intimate, true knowledge of God Himself.

John then gives several examples of the kind of people who come openly into the light. First, we have John the Baptist, truly a man without a mask on – he doesn't care about being politically correct – he calls it as he sees it. Two of his followers, Simon and Peter also come along and finally, we get down to verse 43, "*The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, "Follow me." Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote— Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked. "Come and see," said Philip.*"

Let's stop there for now. After being called by Jesus, Philip goes and finds someone named Nathanael. He then tells him that he has just met the long-anticipated Messiah. The one who would deliver the Jews from their oppressors as revealed in the Law and the Prophets. Philip identifies this one as Jesus of Nazareth. Just think of how HUGE that news would be! But Nathanael doesn't buy it right off the bat. "*Nazareth!*," Nathanael says, "*Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?*" Now we aren't told how Nathanael said this line. We don't know if he was being sarcastic or serious. Many have seen this line as a derogatory, racist remark. Others have seen it as a humorous one. We really don't know. What we do know is that Nazareth was a nothing town, barely known in antiquity. So at the least, it was like saying, "Tariffville! The Savior of the World is going to come from Tariffville? Are you kidding me?!" Nate is skeptical and he isn't afraid to show it – he is honest. And Philip gives us a good reminder of the best way to handle skeptics – "Come and see Jesus for yourself!" So off they go to do just that.

Verse 47, "*When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false."* Like with Nathanael's remark, commentators have given various ideas on what Jesus means here. Is he judging Nathanael? Is he being humorously sarcastic? I don't think so. Let's take a look at two key words. First, Jesus says that Nathanael is a "true" Israelite. The Greek word is (LCD) "**alethos**" and it means "**true, genuine, authentic.**" As we say every Easter, "Christos anesti!" (Christ is risen!), "Alethos anesti!" (Truly risen!) In other words, you bet He is risen...no doubt

about it. This word was always used in Hebraic literature to denote a genuine state. It is never used in a negative or sarcastic way. Jesus finds Nathanael to be the “real deal.”

Jesus says that Nathanael is a true, authentic Jew because he has, second key word, “nothing false” in him. Your translation may say he was “without guile.” The word used here is (LCD) *dolos* and it means false, deceitful, a trickster. One who is “without guile” is one who speaks what he or she really thinks. They don’t smile in public and gossip in private. You know where you stand with someone like this. There is no hidden motive, no second-guessing what they’re up to or thinking. They are open, honest, and frank. Jesus says the kind of person he’s looking for is a true person, a genuine person. He can work with that kind of person. It’s the New Yorker who drives you nuts with his frankness, yet also endears you with his honesty. It’s the young girl who says, “Mommy, didn’t you say that you didn’t like Aunt Sally?” Honest, straight, authentic, real. We struggle with this in the Christian sub-culture. I’ll never forget a Christian friend of mine who once remarked that he enjoys being with swearing, beer guzzling non-Christians more than with smug believers because of this “realness” factor.

Nathanael is real and in response to Jesus’ judgment of his character, Nathanael asks a good question. Verse 48, *“How do you know me?” Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, “I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you.” Then Nathanael declared, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.”* Jesus responds by saying that He had seen Nathanael under THE fig tree. Notice the text says “the.” Not just any tree...Jesus names the specific tree that Nathanael was under. He displays His omniscience here and it will cause Nathanael to frankly confess Jesus as the Son of God and the King of Israel in verse 49.

With that in mind, I wonder what Nate was up to under that tree. What did Jesus see him doing and thinking? Here is a picture of a (LCD) **fig tree**. Notice how large it is and how shaded it is. According to Bible scholar Craig Keener, teachers often taught disciples under trees because of their shade. It was a frequent meditation spot as well...quiet, cool, private. Some think that Nathanael may have been reading the Scriptures when Philip found him. Perhaps he was reading about the most deceitful, guile human in the Bible...Jacob...the original Israelite. Why do they think this?

After Nathanael’s bold declaration of Jesus’ identity, Jesus makes him a promise, verse 50, *Jesus said, “You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that.” He then added, “I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”* He says that because he has responded well to this interaction with truth, he will be privy to insider information about God Himself...greater things. He then references the account of Jacob in Genesis when he had a vision of angels ascending and descending a ladder between heaven and earth. Jacob proclaimed the spot he was at to be Bethel, “the house of God,” and the “very gate of heaven.” Now in chapter two of John, Jesus is going to say that He himself is the new temple or house of God, and in chapter ten, Jesus is going to say that He is the gate to heaven. In other words, Jacob’s awesome vision is fulfilled in the mission of Jesus. Nathanael actually did get to see the fulfillment of this mission in the

last chapter of John in which he is among those who see the resurrected, victorious Savior! What a wonderful reward for those who are genuine.

What is exciting to me is that the word “you” in verse 51 is in the plural. It isn’t spoken only to Nathanael. Verse 50, with the singular “you” is for him, but the great promise of advanced knowledge is given to all those, the plural “you”s who would come openly and honestly to Jesus...like Nathanael. Jesus’ hospitable spirit and Nathanael’s authenticity have combined to change Nate’s life forever. Remember, **(LCD) Truth plus Transparency equals Transformation**. God is waiting for us to come honestly and sincerely to Him to transform us; and He wants to do so through our hospitality. I want to take a few minutes now and show you a video testimony of a woman named Rosaria Butterfield. Watch her story and then we’ll wrap up. (VIDEO: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kfYibfY6fQk>)

What a powerful story! Are there any Rosaria’s in your world? Anyone you can intentionally welcome into your home? If you can’t think of anyone, we have an opportunity for you. If you go to our **(LCD) Wintonbury website under Events**, you’ll see Refugee Resettlement Interest Meeting. Connecticut is getting ready to receive hundreds of refugees over the next few months. These families have undergone a rigorous, years-long vetting process to flee violence and persecution in order to build a life in the United States. Let’s welcome them in the name of Jesus!

A group of Converge churches in the Hartford area is putting together a team to resettle a refugee family locally. We’re looking for volunteers to help with this effort. Interested? Come to an interest Zoom call to find out more. The call will be kicked off by Susan Gaston, Interim Director of Outreach at Valley, and will end with church-specific breakout rooms to discuss involvement. The Zoom call will be held this Tuesday, October 19 at 7pm and the link to it is on our website.

Our atmosphere values again are, **(LCD) Hospitality: We create spaces where people feel welcomed and valued. Authenticity: We encourage people to live with integrity by being honest in their relationships with God, themselves, and each other.** We’ve got a rich history of welcoming strangers and being a real church with real people. Let’s continue to be a **(LCD) hothouse of transformation** for any and everyone!