

### “Justice Like a Mighty Stream”

My father went to Virginia Tech. So I grew up hearing how wonderful a college it is. But the parents of my friends were not all Hokies. There were moms and dads that went to UVA, the University of Richmond, VMI, William & Mary, and dozens of out of state college and universities. To go along with the bragging about each one’s beloved alma mater and sports rivalries were the jokes. The most jokes seemed to be between UVA and Tech.

For example: “How many Hokies does it take to change a light bulb?” Answer: One, but he gets four credits for it.” Another example: How many UVA students does it take to change a light bulb? Answer: “One—he just holds the bulb and lets the world revolve around him.”

In truth it seems we love picking on our perceived rivals whether it is universities, other nations (especially the French), neighboring towns or states, and the list goes on and on. Today, we hear about a similar situation. Phillip has just met Jesus. After their encounter Phillip finds his friend 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.” Now I suppose if I were Nathaniel I might have asked Phillip “How do you know he is the one Moses and the prophets wrote about?” Or I might have asked Phillip, “What has this man done or said that makes you think he is so special?” I might have asked nothing and just told him to take me to see this man. I might have even been skeptical to the extent that I would not believe him. I could have said, “Yeah a new messiah shows up every week. This is no different.”

Instead Nathaniel takes a jab at Jesus’ hometown. Nathanael said to Phillip, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Phillip does not argue with him he just encourages Nathanael to, “Come and see.” When Nathanael meets Jesus he is surprised by Jesus’ foreknowledge of him and proclaims him “the Son of God! ... the King of Israel!” It does not take very much to change Nathanael’s mind. Maybe it was low expectations because of his opinion of Nazareth. I expect it was something much more than that. Regardless, it seems that Nathanael is won over in an instant.

Jesus’ power to win over disciples and other followers just by asking them to follow is remarkable. In the synoptic gospels (Mark, Matthew, and Luke) he is able to ask the fisherman to follow him and they drop everything and do so. They leave behind families, friends, homes and occupations to follow this itinerant teacher. Here he asks Phillip to follow and not only does he do so, but he goes out recruiting other followers.

Compare Jesus’ power to persuade to the story we here read from Samuel. It takes God several times to get through to Eli and Samuel that it is God calling. Of course, when Samuel finally understands whose voice he is hearing he sits up and pays attention. When we understand it is God speaking we do seem to pay attention, but it can take a while for God to get through.

Thus I want to go back to Nathanael’s response to Phillip. When we are telling Tech, UVA or similar jokes it is apparently all in good fun. We do not really believe a student at Tech gets class credit for changing a light bulb any more than we really

believe that UVA students are all self-absorbed. Sadly, there are times when our jabs are no longer jokes but bonafide prejudices.

We heard in the news this week that the president was reported to have used profanity when describing Haiti, Africa and El Salvador. I do not want to discuss the veracity of the reporting or the believability of his saying something so crude. What I am more interested in is the responses of people who defended the purported statement.

What we heard from too many people was not abhorrence that such words could be said, but that they agreed with them. These were people, many of whom self-identify as Christians, who felt that if those words were used there was nothing wrong with it. Sadly this was the kind of "Christianity" that I grew up in. I grew up with Christians who thought that Jack and Bobby Kennedy got what they deserved for supporting the civil rights movement. Many of the same Christians celebrated the murder of Martin Luther King, Jr. These same Christians were onboard when our minister told us that all Jews go to hell when they die.

I could not be that kind of "Christian." I left the church because these statements did not jibe with what I learned about God and Jesus in Sunday School at the same church. I had learned that Jesus loved us all "red, brown, yellow, black and white." We were all precious in his sight. Not only that but it did not matter how much money you had, what community you lived in, what country you were from. God loved everyone. It made the people of Nazareth mad when Jesus emphasized God's love for the outsider as he retold the story about Elijah and the widow. We are so uncomfortable with God's love for all that we have perverted the story of Sodom and Gomorrah for thousands of years rather than hear the real lesson that was being told. We have neglected the story of the criminal who was crucified with Jesus and was the first to join Jesus in paradise, rather than confess the boundlessness of God's love.

Brothers and Sisters, when we choose to look at other people as second or third class, when we judge a person by the color of their skin rather than the content of their character, when we treat women, children and men as objects of pleasure because we have the power to do so, we demean them but we also demean God.

We are **ALL** created in the image of God, not just some. We must accept this truth. Dr. King said, "Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children."<sup>1</sup> "We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people."<sup>2</sup> We must realize that our destiny is inextricably linked with the destiny of all people in this world, regardless of what they look like, what religion they follow, their gender, or where they live. We cannot be satisfied with our life and our world until, as the prophet Amos wrote, "justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. "I Have a Dream" ©1963

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. Letter from a Birmingham Jail, 1963

<sup>3</sup> Amos 5:24