**Springfield Presbyterian Church**

**September 18th, 2022**

**The Invisible Neighborhood**

1. **Introduction**

Last week, as a short recap, we began our series called, “I’ve

been meaning to ask…” and we started with the question “Where are you from?” As we asked that question, we engaged the idea of identity – that we are from all different places with great and beautiful diversity, yet all called children of God.

Today we come to another text with the same question, this time from the Gospel of John, where we see some of Jesus’ disciples gathering and choosing the call to follow Him. They begin to recognize who he is, but Nathaniel, seemingly innocently, asks this mic-drop question, “Can anything good come from Nazareth?”

Burn. If I were there today with Nathaniel, he’d get a swift elbow to the ribs and I’d tell him that it’s not very politically correct to say that kind of question – those are what we call ‘inside thoughts.’ Do you notice though that it doesn’t phase Jesus? It doesn’t make him feel insulted, or so it seems, because he says that Nathaniel has no deceit within him. It sounds like Jesus just wants to get on with the more important thing at hand, the gathering of disciples, but I think we need to take a few moments to unpack why Nathaniel’s question feels so cringeworthy.

1. It seems sensible

I think the question from Nathaniel resonates with me so much

because it feels so honest – he had the guts to name what we often think. I remember living in West Philadelphia one summer as I went through Clinical Pastoral Education or CPE at the University of Pennsylvania. My goodness, in reflection, I imagine I made my parents worry, especially when they saw where I was living. I sublet a small apartment and in order to get into the apartment, there were four gates with locks you had to get through and then the windows had bars. There’s a reason the windows had bars, there’s a reason the gates were there and I learned why as I served at a Trauma One hospital.

When I would work an overnight shift, I would ordinarily see eight to twelve gunshot wounds a night. I stoically remember a night in which a man was brought in with a superficial gunshot wound and as I was talking with him and the doctor, he seemed completely unphased. The doctor told him that the bullet would eventually come out of his skin and he said to the doctor, “Can I hold onto the bullet? It’s the fifth time I’ve been shot.”

I remember standing there, checking my privilege, and taking a deep breath. This was normal. Yet, there was nothing that should have ever been normal. This was West Philadelphia though, so could anything good come out of West Philly?

What I learned in my time there was that most of the violence was not random, but neighborhood-bound. The people of West Philly are also in a place where they can’t climb the economic ladder – because that’s the underlying thought, right – what good can come from West Philly? “Why should we hire someone from that part of town?” and it takes a good, wise, compassionate employer to think otherwise.

1. Sykesville

Maybe Philadelphia seems too far off, or too obvious, so let’s dig

a little bit deeper here, a little bit closer to home. We are in Sykesville, with farms and seemingly no issues anywhere. Yet, we’ve been confronted through the Poor People’s Campaign that it’s simply not true. The place that automatically comes to mind for me is the section housing near the Historic Colored School House. It’s down the hill, completely out of sight, and so, completely out of mind.

Can anything good come from that part of Sykesville? Yeah. Can anything good come out of West Philadelphia? Yes. Can anything good come out of the ghetto of Nazareth? Yes – in fact, the Savior of the World.

1. Pushing our assumptions

One of the best things about Jesus coming out of Nazareth is

that it reinforces this idea that where we find some of the best, compassionate, smartest, skilled people are in the places that have become invisible. These folks in these places, depending on a variety of circumstances, can be people that show you who God is in the here and now. Those who haven’t felt love growing up – they are the people who go out of their way to show love. Those who don’t have a checkbook or a savings account – they are the people who will put their last pennies in the offering plate because they get it. Those in the invisible places who are hungry know what it feels like to hear their stomach rumble and will offer a neighbor on the street half of their sandwich. These are people who fundamentally get it. They get the fact that these things are important when we, from more privileged backgrounds are able to simply assume that what we need will already be in place.

Can anything good come from these places, from these people, who are hidden by society – yes, they can. It’s about time we close our mouths and start listening to them – because they can teach us about what’s really at stake and important in this life.

V. Nazareth

Thank God that Jesus comes from Nazareth, because our fractured world needs to see the Savior from a tough neighborhood. But here’s what we also know, as Jesus was building up this community, these disciples, to teach, and heal, and lead – that he was dreaming of a better world where Nathaniel wouldn’t have even thought to ask that question.

The Kingdom of God is one of equality, it’s one where no one is invisible, where all are welcomed, and no dream seems too far off. So, as disciples of Christ, we start to look towards that Kingdom, not complacent with the way it is, but moving forth to the way it should be.

V. Affirmation

As I close out this sermon, there’s a mindset I want you to hold onto, then a question. The mindset is this, and it’s hard – trust me, it’s hard for me, I get it – but can we, emphasizing the goodness and belovedness of all people – can we say that ‘Yes, indeed, someone or something good can come from ‘that’ kind of neighborhood.’ It’s not a natural human inclination to have this mindset, but I do believe it’s a holy one. The closer we can get to that mindset, the more we can remember that Jesus came from one of ‘those’ kinds of neighborhoods – it can change our hearts and thus change our actions for the better.

So, the question becomes, “What action can I do to see God’s Kingdom of equality become a reality and what part do I play in God’s story of seeing this come to be?” Unfortunately, like I tell you with most questions, this is a place where you’ll have to dig deep, go to prayer, discern this out – it’s not a question I can simply answer for you because we all have different parts to play. But I want you to think about it, to meditate upon it, because as God’s disciples, this is the work we’re called to in this time and place.

As for me, I’m going to promise myself that I will stop talking or trying to ‘fix’ something, but instead I’m going to choose to simply listen. I think I need to listen first, and then God will call me from there to the next steps. Maybe that’s your journey, maybe it’s not – but whatever road God calls you down, may you do so with compassion, with conviction, and with the knowledge that who we are and where we come from all begins with God and God calling us beloved. Amen.