

**“Under the Fig Tree” based on John 1:43-51 and Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18**

**Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on January 14, 2024, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

Now, don't raise your hands, please don't. But consider your answer to this question: Do you have a secret? Is there something you are hiding from someone else? Is there something you would not share because you don't want to be ashamed? Is there something you fear might define you, make people judge you, and destroy the image you have crafted, if it were known?

Truly, this is every single one of us, even if we won't admit it. I expressly asked you not to raise your hands, because I know we would not have had 100 percent of your hands raised, because we don't like to admit flaws or what we are ashamed of. We are afraid to admit anything we think might make us look bad.

The truth is that most of our secrets mean a lot more to us, than to anyone else, really. Most of the secrets in this room are secret because of our fears and our anxieties. We have a sense of unease, that someone might like us less, or respect us less, if they truly knew us. We worry if they knew how messy our houses are normally. Or if they knew that topic which we talk about a lot is something we don't know really all that much about. Or if they knew that this health problem isn't really minor, or if they knew we had doubts about our faith. If they knew how we really voted.

In reality, these are all minor things, but they feel like major things in our heads to us. And so, our natural tendency then is to curate what we present to the public. In our desire for control, we want to dictate what we want the world to see about us. Make no mistake, the person presenting an image of perfection on Facebook or Instagram, and the person who seems to desire being a recluse who hates the world, are both artists, crafting an image which they want to control. The same goes for all of us in between who are holding back the things they don't want to be known, and openly sharing the things that support the crafting of that image. And so, the question isn't IF we hold secrets, but how many, and how tightly we hold them.

What was Nathaniel's secret? What did Jesus see underneath that fig tree? Why did this simple statement of fact – I saw you underneath the fig tree – prompt this man, who went in skeptical, to proclaim Jesus as God and King?

In the series, the Chosen, they decided to present Nathaniel in a crisis of faith. He is sitting beneath the fig tree wondering if God had a purpose for him. The series gives him the back story of being an architect, who is fired after an accident on his building site. It causes the structure to collapse injuring, or maybe killing, some of the workers.

Nathaniel sits under the fig tree, distraught over his failure. He is alone, praying. “This was for you!” he says, quoting psalms of lament, begging to be heard. “This was done for you. Do not hide your face from me. Do you see me?” He cries out as he burns the plans he had drawn. Then he puts the ash on his own head. In a later scene depicting our reading, the Apostle Philip finds Nathaniel in the dark, in his room, mired in depression over his failures. Philip tells him of Jesus, and Nathaniel doubts him: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” And Philip says, “Come and see!”

There is no biblical evidence, nor tradition, that says Nathaniel was an architect. But the image helps us probe the question we have when reading the text, ‘What did Jesus see under the fig tree?’ The beautiful acting and storyline illustrate this moment beautifully, and I love the idea of the

architect being called to help build Christ's Church, which is not a physical structure, but all of you who make up the body of Christ in the world.

However, for us this morning, I want you to keep it simple. What is it that you might pray about under the fig tree? What insecurity might you confess to God?

The story of Nathaniel reminds us that even though we hide things about ourselves, in truth, we feel most secure, the most loved, when we feel truly known. What we don't want is to be misunderstood. We don't want to be analyzed, and don't want to be judged. We want to be known. We desire to be known in full and it is only God who knows us this way. Yet, even to God, we try to present ourselves in a crafted image.

Yet the Psalmist tells us: the Lord who made all things, searches us, and knows us individually. The Lord knows our thoughts from far away, when we are walking in faith on our journey or we are lazy, resting in place. The Lord knows when we recognize we are doing right, and it is the Lord who makes that familiar to us. Before we can get the words of our thought to our tongue, the Lord already knows what we are going to say. Knowing this, understanding how it is possible, feels like it is too much at times.

We are known and formed by God even before we are born, before anyone has seen us. Before our mothers even feel us kick within their wombs, we were known to God. The Psalmist says God sees us when we are unformed and gave us a life to live – days in the book – even when there was no reason to share the gift of life with us. Valuable, precious, and numerous, or weighty, are God's thoughts, and when we are awake to recognize God's truth, then we remain with God and can say, "I am still with you."

Each of us fears "being found out" and yet, at the same time, we desire "being known." There is a difference, even if the same thing we hide from being found out, is the very thing we desire to be known so that we might feel fully known. This is the beauty of the incarnation and what Nathaniel recognizes. Jesus is the embodiment of God in our human flesh. He is recognized by Nathaniel as the eternal Son of God.

The God who made all things knows the experience of human life not just as our Creator who sees us. But he knows us as one of us, having shared in our human limits, showing us how to live, and dying for us on that Roman Cross, only to rise again for us three days later. Beloved, it is by this life, death, resurrection, and ascension, that we are connected to heaven, the place where God dwells in full. This is what Jesus is talking about when he says he is the Son of Man, the ladder, on which the angels ascend and descend, and by which we are brought into the life of God, with the Holy Spirit sent in and among us. The Spirit pours love into our hearts, so it will flow out from us, just as the Psalmist talks of his cup overflowing in Psalm 23.

Beloved, no matter what your fig tree secret is – whether it is an insecurity or even a grievous sin – to be known by God, is not something to fear, because trust me, God already knows. Yet, we often have a picture of an "I know what you did last Summer" type of God, who is just waiting for the meaningful time to avenge our sin against us.

To let ourselves be known by God is to let go of our carefully crafted image, and accept the image of God into which we were made. We see this true image in the fullness of who we could be in Jesus,

through the life, death, and resurrection. For God in our flesh has shown us, what it means to be truly human.

When we choose to accept being known by God, we have the opportunity to become more secure, confessing our sin without making excuses for anything. We lose the credibility of this world which says it is naïve to think we can love our enemies, or that it's naïve to think we can be good in the situations of this world. We call Christ naïve. Yet we are called to recognize that even our flaws are acceptable before God to give our lives as an offering. And what's more, when we do this, we become a better church because we can trust that we are safe in the arms of our beloved God.

If our fellow church member knows how messy our proverbial or literal house is, it's no big deal. When we become more willing to be vulnerable with one another, letting our flaws be known, and trusting that if we are judged by them, all that really matters is God and being awake in God's truth. What should happen then is we judge others less, and we love others more.

Beloved, Jesus says that in Nathaniel there is no bait – which is a figure of speech in Greek – so every bible normally translates it as deceit or guile. I liked bait here because what Jesus is showing us is that what Nathaniel offers us is real. It is not bait on a hook to get something else. Perhaps the fig tree incident was what Nathaniel said about Nazareth, but regardless of what Jesus saw, Philip responds just say, “Come and see.”

The purpose of the church is to invite ourselves and invite others to come and see. Our purpose is to come and see God as part of a community that loves one another and shares that love in the world around us.

To close, I just want to go back to our first hymn, Gather us In, written by Marty Haugen. “Here in this place new light is streaming, now is the darkness vanished away. See in this space our fears and our dreamings, brought here to you in the light of this day.” This is to be seen and known by God. “Gather us in, the lost and forsaken. Gather us in, the blind and the lame. Call to us now and we shall awaken. We shall arise at the sound of our name.”

As Susan noted in the children's sermon, each of us is being called right now just as Nathaniel was called. Let us turn without guile, without trying to get something from the Lord, and accept that love. Let us trust in our God to be open and honest and vulnerable. Let us be more and more that way in this community so that all who come through these doors will feel safe, secure, and loved by God. Amen.

Additional lyrics from “Gather Us In”

*We are the young. Our lives are a mystery. We are the old, who yearn for your face. We have been sung throughout all of history, called to be light to the whole human race. Gather us in, the rich and the haughty. Gather us in, the proud and the strong. Give us a heart so meek and so lowly. Give us the courage to enter the song.*

*Here we will take the wine and the water. Here we will take the bread of new birth. Here you shall call your sons and your daughters. Call us anew to be salt for the earth. Give us to drink the wine of compassion. Give us to eat the bread that is you. Nourish us well and teach us to fashion lives that are holy and hearts that are true.*

*Not in the dark of buildings confining. Not in some heaven light years away. But here in this place the new light is shining. Now is the kingdom, now is the day. Gather us in and hold us forever. Gather us in and make us your own. Gather us in, all peoples together. Fire of love in our flesh and our bones. Fire of love in our flesh and our bones.*