

"Sincerity is the key. If you can fake that, you've got it made." Comedian George Burns said that. Here's something another comedian, W.C. Fields said when caught reading the Bible: "I was looking for loopholes." The famous Evangelist Billy Graham also had something to say about loopholes: "You're born. You suffer. You die. Fortunately, there's a loophole."

Loopholes and sincerity. I bring them up in my message for today because of a character we're introduced to in our Gospel story who is a person who's apparently quite sincere and isn't looking for loopholes. Apparently, he doesn't need to look, because according to Jesus he's just that nice of a guy. In fact, you might say that it is quite the compliment the Lord pays Nathanael at their first meeting. When Jesus saw Nathanael walking toward him, he says, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!"

Now, that's not something that could be said about everyone in this world, not even about individuals who claim to be Christian. Because many of us, even those of us who claim to have good intentions, tend to be calculating in our speech, weighing what we say to put our best foot forward. Or we tend to watch what we say, in order to avoid encouraging someone who's a pest.

Jesus actually says Nathanael is a man with "No deceit," which is the wording found in our New Revised Standard Version translation, and it is an accurate representation of the underlying Greek word. However, some may prefer the rendering of the older Revised Standard Version: "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no guile," also found in the King James Version.

Ok, perhaps we prefer "guile" because even the word has a dark sound to it. A person with guile sounds like someone you'd want to avoid. Indeed, the word "guile" has its roots in the Old English word *wigle*, which denotes witchcraft and sorcery. In modern English, the word has lost the witchcraft connotation, but it still retains a sense of deceitfulness, or of "snare."

But Nathanael, Jesus declares on their first meeting, is a true Israelite, *without* guile – in other words he's not crafty, not deceptive, and not out

to take advantage of others. *The Message Bible* paraphrases Jesus' statement as "Here's a real Israelite, not a false bone in his body." What's more, any Jew who'd grown up learning the Hebrew Bible would immediately recognize other biblical connections behind Jesus' comment about Nathanael. Psalm 32:2 declares, "Happy is the one whom the LORD does not accuse of doing wrong and who is free from all deceit." And Isaiah 53:9 describes the suffering servant of God as one who has "no deceit in his mouth."

So, if Nathanael was without guile, it means that he makes no claim about himself that he does not strive to live up to. He does not wear a mask in public to hide his true feelings. Instead, he gives honest answers. He's sincere and upright. He doesn't look for a loophole; he's not angling for some ethical wiggle room. It was indeed a great compliment given to him by Jesus.

It was a compliment yes, but there may be a bit of satire to be found in his words. Because Nathanael has no guile, Jesus calls him a "true Israelite." And there's a certain irony in that, for the person in the Bible who was originally given the name Israel, and from whom the people of Israel took their name, was Jacob.

He was the one who, as a young man, took advantage of his hungry twin brother Esau and persuaded him to hand over his birthright for a bowl of stew. He was the one who later tricked his father into giving him the blessing meant for Esau. He then later fled from his father-in-law's house after deceiving him about his intentions. In fact, even his name Jacob means "He supplants." (And supplanting is defined as "usurping the place of another, often by underhanded tactics.")

Yet after Jacob wrestles with a divine figure, God blesses Jacob in the form of a new name, Israel (which means, "one who strives with God"). And yet it's not quite clear, however, that the new name given to Jacob results in a character change. Even later that day, after a peaceful reunion with Esau, Jacob deceives him, giving him false information about where he intends to travel next.

In other words, Jesus' comment about Nathanael being a true Israelite, indicates that however Jacob/Israel behaved, God's intention for the people of Israel is that they be without guile – that they be people of integrity. So, Jesus and his "no-guile" remark makes Nathanael a model for the kind of character Jesus' followers should embody and display. That's reinforced by one more allusion to Jacob which Jesus makes in his conversation with Nathanael.

After Nathanael declares his belief that Jesus is the Son of God, Jesus tells him that he will see "heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." This of course is a reference to the dream Jacob had of angels, ascending and descending, connecting heaven and Earth. In fact, in the original event, the place where Jacob had the dream, Bethel, came to be considered holy. Similarly in this morning's narrative Jesus is saying that the angels will ascend and descend upon *Him* as they did on Bethel.

Ok, so with that being said, what is our take home for today? Perhaps our Gospel lesson is a reminder for us Christians that Jesus himself is the holy place. He is the ladder that connects heaven to earth. And as God dwelt at Bethel, so he dwells in Jesus and wherever Jesus is present.

In our story for today we also discover that Jesus is lifting up the importance of possessing an honest character, like that of Nathanael, and that it is to be a trait found in the people of the new Israel -- those who respond to the call of God in Christ Jesus, and that, of course, includes us.

So, if that is the case, what then does it mean for us to be people without *wigle*? Perhaps we can see it better by thinking about what it does not mean. In other words, to be without guile does not mean to be pushovers or naively trusting of all people we encounter in this world. In the animal kingdom for example, dogs comprise one species that's surely without guile. It's generally easy to know what dogs are feeling, because it shows all over their bodies. If they're happy to see you, you know it. If they're frightened, you know it. And so on.

What you see is what they are. They don't seem to possess the genes for deceit; they essentially are simple, trusting creatures who can be easily fooled. They're without guile, but also without wisdom. And yet, in this morning's Gospel, Jesus is not calling for us to be dog-simple or easy targets for scam artists and identity thieves. When Jesus sent his disciples out to proclaim the gospel in the towns of Palestine, he told them, "See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves."

Likewise, to be without guile does not mean to deny that we are complex individuals who are sometimes driven by motives that we're not even aware of. Or that we aren't shaped by experiences and scars from earlier times in our lives. In our dealings with others, we sometimes use defense mechanisms such as denial, rationalization, or passive aggression. And yet, when we're able to be radically honest with ourselves, we can work to get past such coping mechanisms and deal with conflicts in more straightforward ways. But still, it's doubtful that Jesus was trying to make us feel guilty for being human. Being without guile is not a call to deny our complexity, but to live by our highest values.

What's more, to be without guile doesn't mean that we have no social skills. Often social skills are taken to assume that we lie in relatively innocent dealings with others; we tell so-called white lies. We say, "No, that doesn't look like a toupee at all" when we can spot it a hundred feet away, or "The cookies were great," when we didn't like them or "What an adorable baby!" when we're thinking, "Too bad she looks like her father!" Actually, it's possible to be sociable and friendly without lying, though it takes a bit more thought and effort.

More importantly, to be without guile means to live with our hearts open to truth, and not run from it. It means that when we become aware of an unflattering truth about ourselves, we make the necessary changes truth requires of us. We don't bend facts to fit some false idea of ourselves. We're truthful with others and truthful with ourselves. And we admit when we have made a mistake or a misstep. (Note how Nathanael quickly abandoned his prejudicial statement about Jesus --

"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" -- once Jesus spoke with him. One commentator describes Nathanael as "a good man, hampered by prejudice, but quite willing to be enlightened.")

Have you ever lived or worked around someone who is sneaky? How did it make you feel to be around that person? Probably not good. Father Roy Cimagala, a priest in the Philippines, writing about this Scripture reading on Nathanael, says that people without guile are, "humble enough to accept things as they are, never bending them to make the pieces fit [their] own ideas. Rather, the contrary. That's why you immediately feel good every time you meet such persons. They always exude such a welcome and wholesome aura about themselves in spite of their imperfections. They contribute in making society more at peace and in harmony."

Make no mistake, living with integrity and exuding a wholesome aura is not the sum total of Christianity. And there are certainly wholesome people of integrity who are not Christians. But as called disciples of Christ we are aware that to follow Jesus also means to live by the Great Commandments, to follow the examples and teachings of Jesus, and to embrace him as our Savior and Lord. And living without guile is one expression of loving God and loving our neighbor.

Sure, there may come a time for all of us when to lie, to be sneaky, to take advantage of someone else, to deny our wrongdoings, or to do some other devious thing would be expedient or even easy. But Nathanael can serve as a reminder for us that our Lord praised living without guile, and so that makes it the Christian thing to do. And thanks be to God for that! Amen.