

I have to tell you, sometimes people from other faiths make fun of us. Maybe it goes both ways, but I wonder if you have heard any of these jokes. Labels have a way of sticking, even when outdated, they still get a laugh. Apparently, our denomination used to be known for its proclivity for party-making. The joke goes: where two or three Episcopalians are gathered there's always a fifth. Those darn "whiskeypalians." That hasn't been my experience in The Episcopal Church, but there is another label that I hear that just may apply. And that is, we are the "frozen chosen." It just means that we are too reserved and polite to be any good at evangelism. Of course, we know some exceptions, such as our previous presiding bishop Michael Curry, who could light up a room anytime, anywhere, but as a whole, evangelism isn't one of the things Episcopalians are known for. Even our sermons are relatively short compared to some other denominations and cultures. This may be from our Anglican roots in the Church of England. Prince Philip was known for his dislike of lengthy sermons, famously stating, "The mind cannot absorb what the backside cannot endure." He also reportedly described a particularly long sermon as "not a sermon, but a general anesthetic!" Apparently, Prince Philip's backside maxed out around 8 minutes, which is a short sermon. Other Christians look at us and perceive our brevity as part of our frozenness.

But here is my pushback: one does not have to be wordy to spread the good news of Christ. No matter how reserved, polite, quiet, frozen up, or truncated you are, you can still be a phenomenally effective evangelist. How is that? We just look to our patronal saint, Bartholomew, whom we celebrate today.

But before we get into that, let's answer the question, what is a patronal saint? The Episcopal Dictionary of the Church (yes, there is such a thing) says that the custom of having a patronal saint can be traced to the practice of building churches over the tombs of martyrs. Saints can be chosen for a variety of reasons, and I wish I could say I know why Bartholomew was chosen, but I haven't uncovered that yet. Many believe that "patron" or "patronal" saints, it means the same thing, are protectors and intercessors for the churches that they are named for.

So, who was this apostle? (Father Robert gave us a nice explanation in 2024. In case you weren't there or don't recall,) in Matthew, Mark and Luke, he is listed as Bartholomew, one of the twelve disciples. But Robert pointed out that Bartholomew is a patronymic name, and means the son of Tolmai. Then in the Gospel of John, he is called Nathaniel. Possibly we are getting his first and his last name: Nathaniel Bartholomew. I always get such a kick out of this because I know a Nat Bartholomew in Arlington, VA. He's a Catholic accountant.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus calls Nathaniel to be one of his disciples by saying, "I saw you while you were under the fig tree," which is why our podcast has the same name. The longer exchange from John goes like this: ⁴⁷When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" ⁴⁸Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." ⁴⁹Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" ⁵⁰Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these."

We don't know a lot but we don't need to, but the basic facts are there. This is why we can look to him as a model for our own evangelism. Bartholomew knew who Jesus really was, and he heard the wonderful words that he said and he saw the amazing things he did. It didn't matter that he wasn't part of the inner circle with James, John and Peter. It didn't matter that his words are not recorded throughout the Gospels. All that mattered was that he was changed by the presence of God and he went and told others the good news. Where he went isn't entirely clear. It seems he went east, maybe to Northern India while Thomas was in the south.

Although the country that claims him most is Armenia, where he evangelized with Jude. It's also where his journey ended with martyrdom. (Lest our appetite for the picnic be ruined, we will skip over that part.)

Bartholomew teaches us that you don't have to be a front-row type of Christian to be an effective evangelist. All you need is a pure heart. Jesus saw that Bartholomew was not two-faced or cunning. Not a deceiver but honest, sincere, transparent and real. Just who Jesus needed on his team. Bartholomew spoke freely about what he thought. He recognized Jesus as the real deal. This allowed him to reveal Jesus for who he truly is. In turn, people then recognized Bartholomew as the real deal, one pure of heart, and they listened and they were changed. There is nothing more complicated to say about Bartholomew, nor about us.

On this feast day of our patronal saint, I suggest that we simply need to pick a statement to finish. Here are some possibilities:

Jesus moves in my life ...

God brings healing to me ...

Jesus is at the center of my world ...

Pick one or more, and tell what is in your heart using "I" statements. When you use "I" statements, no one can argue with you because it's your reality. You own it. This also means only you can give it away. When you do that with sincerity and honesty, no one can look away. When you speak and act with love and authenticity, even people from non-Christian faiths will turn their heads, for they also will want to know about your experience with the divine. Always remember that you have no product to sell, no memorized pitch to make. What is in your heart right now is not only enough, it is just right. Bartholomew was not a traveling salesman. Like the others, he acted and spoke in ways that shared his experiences with Jesus, and he was phenomenally effective because he was so real.

Our church was founded not over his bones but in his name. We don't know the exact decision-making around this choice,* only that it happened in May 1960, but we can be assured that the choice was made with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Honestly, that's all we need to know. With Saint Bartholomew watching over us, let us model his sincerity—we speak our pure truth from our hearts, each in their own way. For where we see God, we find our blessedness and others can too. And so it goes, and so it grows. We may not be street corner preachers, but we are all chosen and our hearts are definitely not frozen. And know that your preachers can get their points across in 15 minutes or less.

I end with a reminder from our first reading in Deuteronomy: *I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command.*

See Jesus in your heart, your life, your whole being. Give voice to this blessedness, for nothing is more powerful than your truth. Amen.

*I have since heard that the bishop of the Diocese of Los Angeles chose this name. This, of course, would have been when San Diego was part of that diocese.