A friend sent me an email with some tidbits of cynical wisdom. Here are some of the highlights:

- If you think nobody cares about you, try missing a couple of payments.
- Change is inevitable ... except from vending machines.
- For every action, there is an equal and opposite criticism.
- He who hesitates is probably right.
- No one is listening until you make a mistake.
- Two wrongs are only the beginning.
- Monday is an awful way to spend 1/7th of your life.
- A clear conscience is usually the sign of a bad memory.
- Bills travel through the mail at twice the speed of checks.
- 42.7 percent of all statistics are made up on the spot.
- If at first you don't succeed, then skydiving definitely isn't for you.

Experience is a hard teacher. Life does not always meet our expectations, and we find ourselves revising our expectations down. Last week we looked to John the Baptist as a paradigm for what we should look for in spiritual leadership. We saw that he proclaimed that: he was not the Christ; he pointed others to the Christ; and he prompted others to follow the Christ. These are things we should look for, but our spiritual leaders don't always rise to those standards. Our spiritual leaders often disappoint us. They say the wrong thing. They don't recognize effort on the part of others. They can be greedy and petty, and can hurt us deeply.

In this week’s passage we meet Nathaniel, who has tasted disappointment and has turned cynical. But Nathaniel comes face to face with Jesus Christ, and because of that personal encounter his perspective changes. After this encounter, Christ promises Nathaniel greater insight than he had ever dreamed.

**Philip the Enthusiast Meets Nathaniel the Cynic (John 1:43-46)**

The passage starts off with Christ's call to Philip. We aren't given many details about the call; John only tells us that Philip responded in faith and followed. Then look at what Philip did: he found Nathaniel (who is also called Bartholemew in some of the other gospels) and told him, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote –
Jesus of Nazareth.” Again, the gospel is woefully sparse on details, but I believe we can infer a few things: 1) Philip knew Nathaniel well enough to know his interest in the coming of the messiah; 2) Philip was enthusiastic about sharing his encounter with Christ. This is often the way the gospel spreads – one person commends it to another, face to face, person to person, in the context of a relationship.

Nathaniel, however, came back with a cynical reply, “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” Many people make this out to be a reflection on Nazareth, that Nazareth had the reputation of being full of fools. That may be the case, but I believe that there was more going on with Nathaniel. I believe Nathaniel had become cynical.

Nathaniel was passionate about Israel. The Israelites’ deep longing for meaning and worth came from their national identity as the people of God, as God’s covenant people. Nathaniel, as a good Israelite, longed for God to redeem Israel. He longed for God to send a messiah who would lead Israel into a new era of international prominence. Like so many Israelites, he bound up his sense of purpose and worth with his people. And yet he suffered only disappointment. The Maccabean revolt a century and a half before had failed to establish Israel’s prominence. Prophets and preachers wandered throughout Israel proclaiming that the messiah was coming, yet Israel was still in Roman chains. Nathaniel was becoming cynical and jaded. His attitude was “show me the money; I’ve heard all the claims, now let’s see some action.”

Philip persevered and invited Nathaniel to come and see. Notice that Philip was not put off by Nathaniel’s caustic response. Francis Schaeffer, the great apologist, once said that honest questions deserve honest answers. The key phrase there is “honest questions.” The questions skeptics ask are often smoke and mirrors that obscure the deeper heart questions. They ask questions like, “Doesn’t the Bible contradict itself?” Or they make statements like, “Science has proven that miracles don’t happen.” But underneath they ask the heart questions: “What makes my life significant?” “How can I become whole when I feel so empty?” “How can I become clean when I know I’m so dirty?”

Every morning when I left my apartment, I saw him waiting for his ride to work. He was friendly enough, greeting me with a smile and a few friendly words. But he was a rough looking character: muscular and wiry with shaggy hair, a tattoo, and a cigarette usually hanging from his mouth. One evening, I came home to find him talking with my wife Tammy outside our door. He was high on ecstasy, which if you’re not in the know is one of the new party drugs. He told me that he’d gotten in some trouble with the law a while back for drunk driving and had seriously injuring another driver. Now his parole officer was looking for him and he was scared. He told me about the time he spent in jail. He told me about his young son whom he never sees because the mother took the boy back home
to Maine. He told me about his best friend who killed himself while high on heroin. He had a history of drug and alcohol abuse. He came from a horribly dysfunctional family. A pitiful look came to his eye as he said, “But I’m a good person, you know. I wouldn’t hurt anybody. I love people. I’m a good person.” He had a longing within him, and it was a longing that drugs didn’t answer and money didn’t answer and sex didn’t answer. It was the longing for significance, the longing for wholeness, the longing for cleanliness when he felt so, so dirty.

Nathaniel’s question was smoke and mirrors – he didn’t really want an answer. And Philip didn’t even bother to answer because he knew the deeper heart questions that Nathaniel asked. Philip simply said, “Come and see. Come and see the Christ and encounter him for yourself. You’ll get the answers you really want.”

Christ the King Disarms Nathaniel the Cynic (John 1:47-48)

Now we shift scenes to the encounter between Christ and Nathaniel. As we read it, it sounds kind of odd. We get the vague sense that Christ was somehow complementing Nathaniel, but Nathaniel’s response to Christ’s words seems a bit overdone. What’s going on here?

Jesus saw Nathaniel and said two things. First, he called Nathaniel a true Israelite in whom there was no guile. Second, he told Nathaniel that he had seen him sitting under the fig tree. The true Israelite image works on a couple of levels. On the surface, Jesus simply said, “You are faithful.” On another level, this statement was a play on words referring to the patriarch Jacob. Jacob was a man in whom there was lots of guile, lots of falsehood. Go back to Genesis and read his story – he was a trickster until he wrestled with God. Then his perspective changed, he turned his life around and God named him Israel. So there was a subtle playfulness when Jesus called Nathaniel a true Israelite in whom there was no guile.

The fig tree, on the other hand, was a place of rest and comfort. The prophets of ancient Israel had used the image of the fig tree to convey a picture of God’s end-time kingdom. In Zechariah 3:10, after describing how God would remove the sin of the high priest and the land, the prophet wrote, “In that day, each of you will invite his neighbor to sit under his vine and fig tree, declares the Lord Almighty.” The prophet Micah used the image in the same way, describing the state of man after the kingdom has arrived (Mic. 4:5). Because of this imagery, faithful Israelites would sit under a fig tree as a place of prayer and hope and expectation.

Jesus used these two literary images to convey his understanding of Nathaniel’s deep identification with Israel and his longing for deliverance. IN
effect, Jesus was saying to Nathaniel, “I know what’s on your heart. I know you’ve been praying for the messiah. I know you want God’s kingdom to be restored.”

We don’t know what Nathaniel expected. If I were he, I would’ve expected a sales pitch. “This is why you should follow me. Let me tell you what I can do for you. Let me explain to you my qualifications. Four out of five experts agree that I am the messiah.” But Jesus greeted Nathaniel unexpectedly by speaking directly to what was most on his heart. Jesus immediately got past the cynicism and smoke screen to encounter the core issue for Nathaniel. Jesus didn’t play games, but penetrated to the yearning that Nathaniel felt most. And Nathaniel responded with simple faith and joy. He told Christ, “You are the Son of God, the King of Israel.” His quick switch from cynicism to earnestness indicates the depth to which Christ had touched him.

This is an example of the kind of disarming encounter we can expect of Jesus Christ. Jesus gets past our defenses to speak to our longings. He reminds us that we were designed and created with dignity. We have been given talents and abilities that can be used for a purpose. Our daily labors have more significance than the week-in, week-out grind of earning a paycheck. Our physical bodies and relationships mean more than mere gratification. As God’s people, we are cherished and loved and adored and doted on.

There was a man who was coming home from speaking at a conference. His speech had been a disaster, and many of his colleagues had disdained his ideas. The man was tired and he didn’t feel like talking to anybody, so he did the one thing that was guaranteed to keep people away: he opened up his Bible. He told himself he’d just flip open and read whatever was there. He flipped open to Psalm 23. “Psalm 23!” he said to himself with annoyance. “I’ve memorized that Psalm. I’ve taught classes on that psalm. What in the world could I possibly learn from this?” But he sucked in his pride and he read. He read “The Lord is my shepherd.” And, oblivious to those around him, he began to weep, enveloped in God’s tender embrace. Jesus gets past our walls and defenses to touch us where we most need it.

**Christ Promises Greater Insight (John 1:50-51)**

We’ve seen that Nathaniel had an inner yearning that was crushed so that he became a cynic. Christ spoke to that inner yearning in a way that only he could, and Nathaniel responded in faith. Now look what Christ promised in verses 50-51. This statement was guaranteed to blow Nathaniel’s mind because
it spoke to his heart yearning, but in a way that far exceeded expectation. Christ didn't promise to restore Israel – he promised to open up heaven and show the inner workings of creation. The image of angels ascending and descending comes from the vision of Jacob's ladder in Genesis 28:12. There, God promised that Jacob would be father to a great nation. Through this image, Christ let Nathaniel know his plans to build a great nation – but it would not be the kind of nation Nathaniel expected. Christ did not take for himself the title "king of Israel," but "Son of Man." Most of the Old Testament uses the term "Son of Man" to refer simply to a human. But the prophet Daniel used the term to describe the individual to whom God would give authority over all creation. It was not so much a political title as it is an end-times title. Jesus was in effect saying, "I'm a bigger king than you ever expected."

And we the readers say, "Of course." Who else could speak to our deepest yearnings but the one who was present at the beginning of creation and who crafted those very yearnings within us? Christ knows those yearnings even better than we do. As we walk with him, and grow deeper and wiser in faith, he'll teach us. He'll reveal to us understanding about the yearnings he's placed within us, and about the corruption that sin works to those yearnings. Christ will be a king of a totally different sort.

Nathaniel’s inner yearnings were crushed and he became a cynic. But when Christ, the King of Creation, spoke to those yearnings, Nathaniel responded in faith. Then Christ promised the unexpected: spiritual insight.

If you've never read Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*, get it and read it. It is worth every bit of effort it takes to read. Jean Valjean, a hardened convict who has just been released from prison, cannot find work. Everywhere he goes, he must show his papers telling of his crimes, and people turn him away. In desperation, he jumps parole and destroys his papers – a crime that would send him back to prison for life. While on the run, he finds shelter at the house of a priest. That night, while the priest is asleep, Jean Valjean steals the only objects of worth in the house: the silverware and silver candlesticks. Valjean is stopped by the police for violating curfew, and they find the stolen goods. When the police take him back to the priest's house, the priest, awakened by the guards, says that he has given the candlesticks as a gift. He sends the police on their way. Then he turns to Valjean, saying that he has spared Valjean in the name of Christ. He gives Valjean the candlesticks and the silverware, and charges him to become an honest man. All that day, Valjean wrestles in inner turmoil. He is shocked and confounded by what the priest has done. He debates on whether he should kill him or if he should just run with the money. But somewhere in the midst of this turmoil of anger and confusion, God enters the picture and breaks Valjean’s heart. In response, Valjean dedicates himself to the pursuit of goodness. For the rest of the book, Valjean tries to live a just and noble life while the merciless inspector Javert hunts for him. Valjean was a cynic. Christ came to
him through unexpected means and spoke to him. Valjean was so touched, he responded in faith. Thereafter, Christ carries him through the unexpected and successively harder circumstances of his life. The Gospel is for cynics.