

Sermon Bytes: Come and See

John 1:29-42

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It was a hot Summer Saturday afternoon and I was relaxing with my kids out in the back yard of the manse in Tilbury Ontario. I was sitting in a favorite deck chair with the youngest sleeping on my chest and the other two running back and forth through the waters of a sprinkler. The din was so great that I did not hear the door bell through the open patio door until my daughter – age 6 and very much the grownup - ran through the house and came back with a couple of sheepish looking fellows.

“Sorry for the interruption the taller one said. Your daughter said to come on in. And so we did”.

“Ok, what can I do for you?”

“Oh we are evangelists with the Church of the Latter Day Saints, and we are visiting on behalf of our church.”

Staying coy about my insight into the faith community I said, “I did not know there was a LDS church here in town”.

“Oh were not from here” they said. “We’re evangelizing for the church in Chatham – about 15 minutes away. I’m from Ohio and John here – well he’s from Michigan”

“How are your travels going” I asked. And they went on to start talking about the church, when Charissa cued in “We go to Darrel S Moffat Church – and my daddy’s the minister there”. Well – the gig was up. The conversation when on for a few minutes before the young fellows took their leave to try evangelizing some more likely suspects.

If you really want to understand why our church is declining, along with most churches in North America, we need to recognize how frightened most United Church people are by the word “evangelism.” For many it comes from being on the receiving end of someone else’s evangelism. Now it may be “Have you accepted Jesus?” “Are you saved” or the dreaded knock on the door of the Jehovah’s witness or the Mormons. Too many folks have experienced evangelism as coercive, even threatening.

For others, the explanation isn’t nearly as sinister. It simply a conviction that religion isn’t something polite people talk about; or that one’s faith is private; or simply the desire not to be perceived as one of those people (you know, the kind we just described).

Whatever the reason, most of us not only have little experience in evangelism but are downright frightened of it. And that, of course, cripples our ability to tell our story.

In light of this reality, John’s account of Jesus’ baptism and calling of first disciples can offer us inspiration and instruction. John’s account of Jesus’ baptism, is very different from the other Gospels. Here we get a second-hand account from the testimony of John

himself. He doesn't actually describe Jesus being baptized in this gospel; instead he only shares what he sees.

In effect he evangelizes, which is the point of this story -- that when it comes to our relationship with Jesus, our primary job is to see and share. Not threaten, not coerce, not intimidate, not woo or wheedle or plead, but simply to see and share.

John the Baptist does that here. He sees and tells others what he sees. That's it. Andrew later does the same. He tells his brother what he and John's other disciples saw -- the person they believe is the Messiah -- and invites Peter to come along and see for himself.

At its heart, evangelism is that simple. It is noticing what God is doing sharing that with others, and inviting them to come and see for themselves. Here in our lesson. The pattern is repeated over and over again. John the Baptist does it. And then Andrew follows suit. And then in the passage that follows Phillip meets Jesus, and the result is so transformative that he cannot keep it to himself. He goes and finds Nathaniel.

Jesus models the pattern himself. Jesus notices some of John's disciples following him. He asks "What are you looking for?" They, in turn, ask "where are you staying?" Jesus doesn't give an answer. He doesn't question further. All he does in response is make an invitation: "Come and see." Notice: He sees -- he asks -- he invites.

"What are you looking for?" What a great question. "What are you looking for" -- that can lead down all kinds of paths. "Come and See"

Notice -- ask - invite

Evangelism isn't going door to door in the neighbourhood. I would like to share my answers that I already have figured out to the questions you have not asked. It isn't interrogating -- "Are you saved?" "Do you know Jesus?"

Notice -- ask - invite

These are the three elements of biblical evangelism, sharing the good news of what God has done and is still doing through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and how that is still transformational in the world around us. But good United Church people in my experience have been taught not to toot our own horn and so too often the story stops at us.

And we forget our place as instigators. Yet we do it in so many other ways. Over Christmas, a few folks put on a special treat after the service with fruit and chocolates on top of the regular goodies. You noticed and the buzz was all around. In fact I was in line at one of the pharmacies a few days later and one of the cashiers said "You're the minister of the church across Sir John A. I hear you have quite a spread after church the other day".

“We sure did – as I smiled from ear to ear” Because – I knew a secret. One of you have been evangelizing. Or 2/3rds of evangelizing. You noticed – and you shared the invitation – come and see.

A couple of years ago after visiting another church service, I began our services with short vignettes of encounters with the holy because I saw how one person noticing and mentioning created an atmosphere of anticipation. But other priorities came and that pattern went by the wayside. I think we should revive it, but in a bit of a different way so that we can practice our evangelism. Instead of me doing it, take a moment at the first of each service to contemplate on where we have seen God recently. Or if that is too hard, think about a place or situation where God’s help would be welcome.

So take a moment to notice. To attune ourselves to the hand of God at work, and then to discipline ourselves to share. I invited one church to do this by turning to someone near them and sharing one reason they like this church, one reason they like to come. Later, an elderly man came up to me who was known to be a bit crusty. I wasn’t sure what to expect, and was kind of preparing for a blast. Instead he smiled, introduced me to his wife and said, “I want to thank you. You see, this gal and I have been going to church together for sixty years, and it turns out we’ve never known why the other comes!. We will be talking about our experiences of church for a long time to come. Thanks!”

The invitation part may seem the hardest of all. It can feel so intrusive, and of course it puts demands on us to follow through. And yet ... think about it: we invite people to things all the time. If I asked you if you are an evangelist, most of you would say “Who me?” Or, “No not me”. But I hear you telling one another about a movie or show or display that you have gone to see, or a meal that you have made of a craft that you have been working on. And then we invite people to those things we like, those things we’ve enjoyed and think others would, too.

John the Baptist simply shares the wonder of what he saw, and Jesus gains his first disciples - people who will carry his message to the ends of the earth. Jesus invites them to come and see, and they embark upon God’s great adventure. Andrew tells his brother he really ought to meet Jesus, and the rock upon whom Jesus will build his church falls into faith.

Notice

Ask - What are you looking for?

Invite: Come and See