

## Come and See

John 1:35-42

There was an old preacher who once shared the three-step pattern of his sermons. First I tell the people what I'm going to say, then I say it, and then I tell them what I said. I don't follow a set formula, but this morning I do want to begin by telling you what I'm going to talk about. This morning I invite you to consider with me the matter of the "E" word: *evangelism* - the challenge to share our faith and invite others to experience with us the joys and opportunities of life lived with God.

I need to begin with both a confession and a gnawing conviction. First, is the confession... Just hearing the word *evangelism* makes me nervous and anxious. In reality, all of us who have made a commitment of faith are challenged to be evangelists...to live and share in such a way that others may find our faith inviting. The Greek roots of the word *evangel* means one who carries good news...And who among us does not want to be a bearer of good news?

And yet, I still have an uneasiness, and I think I'm not alone in my discomfort with talk of evangelism. For many of us, it conjures up images of browbeating or "Bible-thumping" - efforts to impose one's beliefs and convictions upon others...Church of the Brethren tradition has long emphasized that faith is something freely chosen - with "no force in religion" being a significant theme. Additionally, we have emphasized the living out of our faith, which comes from the conviction that words alone are not enough. As the letter of James puts it, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says (Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers)...faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." (James 1:22; 2:17).

As a result, many of us are far more comfortable with deeds of service than we are with words of invitation...It's not that we don't consider evangelism a part of the Christian life, but we are uncomfortable with reducing it to a program or technique. Instead, it feels as if faith sharing ought to grow out of our living of the faith; it ought to be a natural result of hospitality and relationship.

Our reading of Scripture, our understanding of scripture leads to a linking of word and action, so we are convinced that an invitation to encounter the love of Christ involves so much more than a one-time confession of faith; it involves a continuing call to discipleship, a daily commitment to take up the cross and follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

Sometimes I think an element of our discomfort with evangelism is our fear that we will be identified with those who display the worst techniques of evangelism. I remember some years ago – (actually many years ago, 1969), while in BVS and living in Nappanee, IN, I attended a fall festival – with my long hair, mustache, bell bottoms, and boots. At the festival entrance a rather sour (unpleasant) looking man was handing out small booklets as people entered. I realized that what he was handing out was a copy of the Gospel of John. After thanking him when he handed one to me, he looked at me as if I was not worthy of his time and effort, as if I was so lost there was no possible hope for me...How terrible - how unfortunate it is to take as one's task, the sharing of the good news, and to do it in such a way that the message communicated is anything but good – anything but good news...

When I began this sermon, I indicated that I not only had a confession to share, but also a gnawing conviction. Now, the conviction is that there are persons all around us eager for a fresh encounter with God, but they have come to believe that the church has little if anything to offer them. There are persons all around us yearning for a word of hope or a message of peace. But the voices they hear speaking most loudly from the church are the harsh voices of Christians who are far more likely to bless our nation's efforts to exclude them than to challenge them. These Christians far more prone to proclaim the gospel in ways that exclude others and keep others on the outside looking in, rather than embracing the rich diversity of human life that God has created. One of the great tragedies of our day is that many have little sense of the church as a place to receive genuine care and compassion, a place to discover a meaningful experience of community...And yet,

community, servanthood, peace, compassion – are they not experiences and practices at the very heart of how we Brethren understand the Christian faith?

The gnawing sense behind all this is that we Brethren need to find new and creative ways to share our faith, to make it known in the community and world around us that we are indeed a place to deepen faith, proclaim peace, embrace community, welcome others, and service our neighbor,...in the compassionate spirit of Jesus. You and I do indeed have good news to offer...but in our reluctance to be identified with those who frame the faith differently, we all too often remain silent.

Seems to me that this morning's Gospel lesson offers a way to do evangelism that fits our understanding and experience of the faith. The text is set at the beginnings of the ministry of Jesus, and includes encounters between Jesus and several followers of John the Baptist, who hear John say of Jesus, "Look, the Lamb of God!" (John 1:36)...Here is the one who ushers us into God's presence, who enables us to experience life afresh, to know the gift of forgiveness and peace, to embrace a new way of living.

Two of John's disciples trail Jesus, and when Jesus notices them, he asks, "What do you want? Or "What are you looking for?"...The disciples respond with their own question, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" In effect they are asking much more. They are in reality wondering about Jesus, "What are you about? Who are you really?" And wondering if they might be able to stay for a time in the presence of Jesus, to learn at the feet of Jesus. So, how does Jesus respond to their question...by sharing simple yet inviting words, "Come and you will see" or just plain "Come and see"!

*Come and see.* No arm twisting. No gimmicks. No Bible thumping. No apparent pressure. Just a simple, forthright invitation - come and spend time with Jesus and with those he is calling to join with him in living and proclaiming a new way of living. Come and see - see with eyes of faith, allowing oneself to be transformed by Christ's Spirit.

New Testament scholar, Marcus Borg in a article titled, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* wrote: “Believing in Jesus...is the movement from secondhand religion to firsthand religion, from having heard about Jesus with the hearing of the ear to being in relationship with the Spirit of Christ.” It is a matter of a firsthand encounter with God, trusting that similar words spoken by God to Jesus at the time of baptism are also spoken to us, “You are my beloved (daughter or son).”

And once we are anchored in that kind of love, we find the strength and power to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, going the extra mile in relationships, witnessing for peace, extending arms of reconciliation, offering acts of compassion and care, serving those in need. As Henri Nouwen writes, “Only when your roots are deep can your fruits be abundant.”

*Come and see.* In the verses that follow this morning’s Gospel lesson, the same words *come and see*, are used, but this time in the aftermath of Philip hearing the call of Jesus to walk with him in discipleship. Philip, then, goes to his friend Nathanael. But Nathanael is skeptical of Philip’s talk about Jesus. So Nathanael questions, “Nazareth! Can anything good come out of there?” Philip doesn’t get into a debate with Nathanael; he doesn’t argue with Nathanael, nor does he seek to force Nathanael to believe. Philip simply invites Nathanael, “Come and see”...And Nathanael responds to Philip’s simple invitation.

Dare we take the bold risk of proclaiming to the community around us, “Come and see”. Come and see what it means to live lives rooted in Christ and Christ’s new way of living. Come and see what it means to walk in ways of peace, to thirst for justice, to live as servants, as washers of feet, rather than as those who would lord their power over others? Come and see what it means to live “for the glory of God and the good of our neighbors.”

Brothers and sisters, it is a high calling that stands before us, a calling to enter into the deep, to trust that the very One who calls us, will strengthen and empower us for the journey. Let us respond with all of our heart and soul and strength and courage. Amen.