

“Come and See”

September 20, 2015

The “E” Word: Evangelism Means Sharing Good News series

Many of us might cower in fear when we hear the “E” word. We might be like the guy in this cartoon: **Oh no! Not evangelism!** The reflections that we offered are clear that we come to evangelism with different opinions. Some of us feel OK about it, but some of us get a negative feeling - like evangelism makes us jump to judging others.

I want you to know that: **Evangelism is a not a dirty word.** Even though we might struggle with it, my hope is that we can reclaim it for what it really is: sharing good news. That’s what it means if you break it down: *evangel* literally means “good message.” So when we think about evangelism, we’re talking about sharing a good message.

I’ve been reading a book called Get Their Name, and the author shares that on average, United Methodists invite someone to church once every 38 years. Yes, you heard me right - once every 38 years! Now, I know that doesn’t apply to all of us, but it begs the question: when was the last time you invited someone to worship with you?

This is where the red cards come in. I won’t ask if you brought them back from last week, but I hope you’ve been thinking about the people you will invite to worship with you. I pray that each of us would take the time to pray and consider a friend, relative, acquaintance, and neighbor who doesn’t already have a church home that we might invite to worship in two weeks.

Relationships matter for evangelism. We can’t take for granted that everyone goes to church because they don’t! That’s not a judgment; it’s a reality. You and I know many people who do not have any connection to a church at all. Some of us might know someone who has never, ever, been to church. We can lament decline in the church all day long, but we can’t sit here and do nothing! If we care about it, we have to invite.

Personal invitation is the most effective tool in church growth. Word of mouth is how we get the word out - whether it’s conversation, text, or Facebook or other tools. That’s how it worked for Jesus. If you look back John, chapter 1, Jesus invites Andrew and Peter to “come and see.”

And then we’re told that Jesus finds Philip. “Come, follow me.” And Philip does! We don’t know the rest of the conversation - or if Philip realized that following Jesus would turn his life upside-down. All we know is that Philip responds to Jesus’ call and then tells Nathanael that he had found the One they’d been waiting for. Philip and

Nathanael were friends. Philip invited Nathanael with that simple phrase: come and see.

Our witness of faith isn't about forcing people to change; it's about letting the love of Christ work in us. It's not about intensity, but intimacy. It's about using the relationships we have as an opportunity to invite - and to be intentional about it. Nobody can accept an invitation if it's not offered.

Philip offers an invitation just like he received from Jesus – no argument, no coercion. Philip doesn't get bent out of shape when Nathanael shows resistance. He simply says, "Come and see." He doesn't make a judgment about Nathanael's faith or lack of it. Even when Nathanael is honest, has questions, even some resistance and some skepticism: "You mean to tell me that the One we've been waiting for is from Nazareth?"

Philip simply says, "Come and see" because of his experience of coming to Jesus. Philip knows that Nathanael has to experience Jesus for himself. Philip doesn't get into an argument or try to manipulate Nathanael into doing something he's not prepared to do. He allows Nathanael's doubt and questions. And when Nathanael realizes that Jesus knows who he is and that he is known by God, he proclaims Jesus as the Son of God.

We can learn from Philip. An invitation isn't a debate. An invitation isn't an opportunity to judge others. An invitation isn't a wish. I wish for a lot of things, but they don't always come true.

When we invite people to "come and see," our invitation needs to be personal, specific, and relational. *Personal* means that we take time to invite someone directly face to face if we can - or over the phone or perhaps over Facebook. The invite should be *specific* - invite them on Oct. 4 for worship. And make it *relational* - offer to pick them up and sit with them. Don't invite someone if you're not planning to be here! Make sure it's in your plan to be here and be the first person to show hospitality.

Maybe it doesn't sound so terrible and daunting, but I know that someone is thinking: Faith is a private thing. I can't talk about that with anyone. I don't want to offend them. If statistics are right, then be assured that over 90% of people aren't offended by an invitation to church. In fact, more than 80% of them who don't attend church say they would go if someone invited them.

And even if someone declines your invitation, perhaps you've planted a seed and opened a conversation. Jesus calls all of us to invite others to "come and see" when we know the joy of knowing and loving him.

Maybe you're thinking: But what if I invite them and then they ask me why they should come? What if they ask me why I go to church? What should I say? We'll get to that.

Some of us might even be saying, "Isn't it your job, Pastor, to get people here?" I know with all certainty that your invitation to those you know means a whole lot more than mine ever could. I'm supposed to share my love for the church and share my faith, right? But we're all called to share our faith!

It's clear from the beginning that Jesus calls us all to do that work so that the Kingdom of God is real. It's not one person's job; it belongs to all of us! Our challenge today is that there are many who could be invited, but not enough people inviting. We can't wait for people to come through the church door; we must engage people where they are in the world. That's the power of the woman on the video - it really is our move.

And if you're not sure how you'd answer someone if they asked you about why you go to church, I suggest that you take time to pray about it and write something down - just 2 or 3 sentences to tell someone why it matters to you. You don't have to write a theological treatise about it. Start with what matters. Why are you here today?

Whether it's being a part of a community or remembering that you need God's help or finding peace or knowing God's forgiveness or because you love to sing - start there. And if you start, maybe you can share your thoughts with a family member or friend first before you invite someone else. You can try it out on me if you want. Most of all, pray for God's help and for the people you want to invite.

We're not in control of how people come to faith in Jesus - that's God's work. But our witness and invitation can encourage others to come to Jesus just like Philip helped Nathanael to do. Following Jesus means telling our story and reaching beyond ourselves in faith that God is at work. And we grow in our faith when we share it. It makes our faith stronger.

Kathleen Norris writes, "I have learned two things about my religious quest: First of all, that it is God who is seeking me, and who has a myriad of ways of finding me. Second, that my most substantial changes, in terms of religious conversion, come through other people. Even when I become convinced that God is absent from my life, others have a way of suddenly revealing God's presence."

And so it is for Nathanael. Philip's invitation to "come and see" changes both of their lives. I imagine Nathanael excited because of his revelation that Jesus truly is the Son of God. Then Jesus promises that Nathanael will see greater things. Just as Jacob dreamt about the ladder reaching up to heaven with angels going up and coming down,

Nathanael will witness miracles, and his faith will deepen even more. He's only at the beginning of the journey.

Jesus is where the divine and the human meet, where the boundary between heaven and earth becomes blurry. He is God with us. In a world people are isolated and fearful, where there seems to be less good news than bad news, we have good news to share. God is with us! Friends, we have people to go to and say, "Come and see." "People will not come until we first go."

You have small business cards that you can use to invite. Write your name and phone number on the back. Extend the invitation, and see what God does!

Thanks be to God. AMEN.