

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

January 19, 2020 (2nd Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A)
John 1:29-42

Jimmy Carter, in his autobiography *WHY NOT THE BEST?* shared this incident. Each year the congregation of Plains Baptist Church holds a one-week revival service. In preparation for the week, the leaders of the congregation would venture into the community inviting unchurched people to the services. As a deacon, Carter always participated in this exercise. Carter would visit a few homes, read the Scriptures, have a prayer, share some religious beliefs, then he would talk about the weather and crops and depart. Carter wrote: "I was always proud enough of this effort to retain a clear conscience throughout the remainder of the year."

One day Carter was asked to speak at a church in Preston, Georgia. The topic he was assigned was "Christian Witnessing." As Carter sat in his study writing the speech, he decided he would make a great IMPRESSION on the audience by sharing with them how MANY home visits he made for God. He figured in the fourteen years since returning from the Navy he had conducted 140 visits. Carter proudly wrote the number in his script.

But as Carter sat there, he began to reflect on the 1966 governor's election. As he campaigned for the state's highest office, he spent sixteen to eighteen hours a day trying to reach as many voters as possible. At the conclusion of the campaign Carter calculated that he met more than 300,000 Georgians.

Sitting in there his study the truth became evident. Carter wrote, "The comparison struck me--300,000 visits for MYSELF in three MONTHS, and 140 visits for GOD in fourteen YEARS!"

Now, most of us can't count even a FRACTION of 140 visits. So this reading from the Gospel of John asks us: Why are we so HESITANT to share our FAITH? Faith is supposed to make a DIFFERENCE in our lives, and one of those differences is the desire for others to SHARE our faith and see for THEMSELVES the benefits of a RELATIONSHIP with God.

If we're NOT willing to invite others, what does that SAY about our EXPERIENCE of Christ? If we're NOT willing to invite others to our CHURCH, to worship and OTHER activities, what does that say about our experience of our CONGREGATION? And believe me, our SILENCE DOES SAY something.

A story is told of two men who'd been business partners for over twenty years. They met one Sunday morning as they were leaving a restaurant. One of them asked, "Where are you GOING this morning?"

The other said, "I'm going to play golf. What about you?"

The first man responded rather apologetically, "I'm going to church."

The other man said, "Why don't you give UP that church stuff?"

The man asked, "What do you mean?"

"Well, we've been partners for twenty years. We've worked together, attended board meetings together, and had lunch together, and all of these twenty years you have NEVER asked me about going to church. You have never INVITED me to go WITH you. Obviously, it doesn't MEAN that much to you."

You know, I've had people tell me about good restaurants, doctors, optometrists, dentists etc. People have told me about good movies, good places to fish. Why isn't there the SAME enthusiasm to invite and encourage people to come and participate in CHURCH?

Maybe it's our culture. We're told that talking about religion is taboo. But we FIGHT our culture on other things. So why not THIS?

Maybe it's something about OURSELVES. Some say that they're too shy and don't LIKE to talk to people, but I'll bet that ANY of us, shy or otherwise, if we COUNTED the number of people we

ALREADY speak to in a week, we'd be SURPRISED by how many opportunities we HAVE to say something about our faith.

Some say that religion is a PRIVATE matter and SHOULDN'T be shared with others. But that's just a FALSE understanding of Christianity. It's always been PERSONAL, yes, but NEVER PRIVATE. Salvation is a gift from God that is meant for the whole WORLD.

That's the message we see put into action in our gospel reading today – spreading the Word. There's a pattern of a WITNESS BEARING witness to someone else. John the Baptist witnesses to his two disciples, who then follow Jesus. And then, one of them, Andrew, witnesses to his brother Simon. In the story right after this, Jesus finds Philip, and Philip finds Nathanael and witnesses to HIM about Jesus, and he uses the SAME WORDS: "Come and see."

In John's Gospel, it almost seems like a REQUIREMENT that, in ORDER to follow Jesus, you need to invite OTHERS.

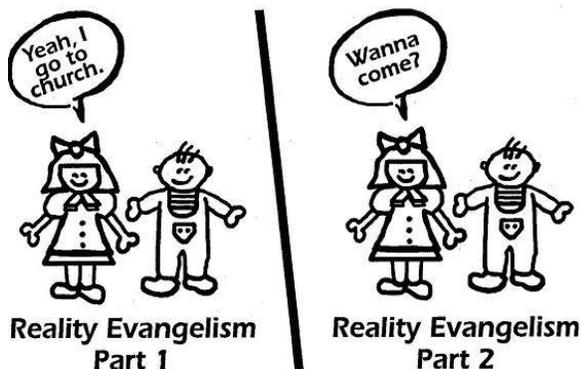
Let's take Andrew as our example. He found the Messiah, he encountered Jesus, and he was SO excited that he couldn't sit still. He RAN to share the good news with his brother Simon.

This was the GREATNESS of Andrew. He was the one who was always INTRODUCING people to Jesus. THREE times we read about Andrew DOING something in the Gospel of John, and EVERY time, he's bringing someone to meet Jesus.

It seems that Andrew's GREATEST JOY was SHARING the good news of Christ and bringing OTHERS into his presence. Having found Jesus, he COULDN'T sit still. He HAD to share Christ with others. Andrew had a strong case of the "can't help it." He was so GRATEFUL, so EXCITED about his new life in Christ that he just couldn't HELP but love Him, and praise Him, and serve Him, and share Him with others. He COULDN'T keep Jesus to himself.

And this is the very ESSENCE of evangelism. Ope, there, I said it, the "E" word! We Lutherans are kind of scared of that word "evangelism," but this is ALL it really MEANS – BEING a witness: To just TELL someone what we have seen and heard and believe for ourselves, to simply SHARE it, and then INVITE them to "come and see" for THEMSELVES. We don't TALK people into it, we don't ARGUE people into it; we just INVITE them. In this gospel, faith BEGINS by responding to the invitation to "come and see."

I saw a refrigerator magnet once with a cartoon with two frames on it. It's called "Reality Evangelism."



The first frame is one person saying to the other, "Yeah, I go to church." And the second shows the SAME person saying, "Wanna come?" What could be more simple than that? THAT'S IT! THAT'S evangelism. It IS THAT simple.

One pastor tells about his high school years, when he was involved in group called Young Life, an ecumenical Christian youth group. They had over 200 kids coming to a meeting every week. The day of the meeting they had ribbons they wore that said, "Young Life Tonight." When people asked, "What's Young Life?" they answered, "Come and see." THAT'S evangelism. It's THAT simple.

We should slap a yellow cover on this part of John and call it “Evangelism for Dummies,” because this is the ESSENCE of evangelism: Just SAY what Jesus means to you, and INVITE them to come and see for THEMSELVES.

Let me tell you about a congregation I know well, that helped SHAPE me as a pastor. They are a GROWING congregation, because their members, and ESPECIALLY their young families and children, are EXCITED about what’s happening there, and they’re INVITING their friends. It seemed like every couple WEEKS they added ANOTHER child, because one of their friends had INVITED them. Their Youth and Family Director always had kids walking up to her and saying, “I want to come TOO!” I remember hearing about ONE of the kids whose PUNISHMENT one week was that he COULDN’T go to church.

This is what I’m talking about. When we LOVE something, when we’re EXCITED about it, we TALK to people about it. We invite them to come WITH us.

And folks, an invitation is powerful. This was on the news a couple years ago.

(Show video Viral Birthday Party)

Just because her parents posted the invitation as PUBLIC instead of private, 1.3 MILLION people RSVP’d to the birthday party. Folks, people WANT to be invited.

So what we will invite people to “come and see” in OUR congregation? Will they see that we are warm and friendly here? Will they see that people are fed and cared for here? Will they see our desire to grow closer to God? Will they see that we have a generous heart and a spirit of service to our community and to the world? We hope so.

But it’s not really ABOUT US. The invitation is to come and see the LORD. Come and see what JESUS is doing here.

Two months before his assassination, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who we commemorate tomorrow, spoke to his congregation at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta about his death, in what would unexpectedly become his eulogy. He said this:

“Every now and then I think about my own death, and I think about my own funeral....Every now and then I wonder what I want them to say. Tell them not to MENTION that I have a Nobel Peace Prize, that isn’t important. Tell them not to mention that I have three or four hundred OTHER awards, THAT’S not important. I’d like someone to mention that day that Martin Luther King, Jr. tried to give his life SERVING others. I’d like someone to say that day that Martin Luther King, Jr. tried to LOVE somebody. I want you to be able to say that day that I DID try to feed the hungry. I want you to be able to say that day that I DID try, in my life, to clothe those who were naked. I want you to be able to say that I DID try to visit those in prison. I want you to say that I tried to LOVE and serve humanity.”

Did you hear echoes of our LORD there? As followers of Christ, we feed the hungry. We clothe the naked. We visit the prisoners. We love and serve. And it’s not ABOUT US, it’s about JESUS, and what HE’S doing THROUGH us.

The Lord is HERE, in this PLACE. We are God’s WITNESSES to that. But no one will KNOW it if we don’t TELL someone. Imagine what this place would look like if EACH of us invited just ONE other person to come to church with us, just ONE! There might be someone in front row! What Jesus is doing is EXCITING, and people need to SEE it, because they need to see JESUS.

So go from this place today and this week and INVITE someone: “Come and see. Come and see what JESUS is DOING here.” Amen.