

**St. Paul's Lutheran Church  
Wildwood, Missouri**

**The Second Sunday after Epiphany  
January 17, 2021  
John 1: 43-51**

Without a doubt, the mission of the church is to make disciples for Christ. Jesus makes that abundantly clear in Matthew 28: 18-20. After his crucifixion and resurrection, and just before ascending into heaven, Jesus said to his followers, *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."* No fuzz on that. Jesus is very clear that during the time between his ascension into heaven and his return, his disciples are to go forth and make more disciples.

The great debate throughout the history of Christianity has always been, however, just how do we go about doing that? To that end we have seen many misguided evangelistic efforts ranging from governments imposing Christianity on people by fiat, to enticing would-be believers through what is called *"mission dating."* If you have never heard of *"mission dating"* it is the use of young people in your church to date unbelievers so that they eventually can be *"lured"* into the church. I could spend a month talking about what's wrong with that approach.

At a very practical level, though, I believe we can gain some insight into evangelism through our text for today from John. And, what we see is that the basics of evangelism are really quite simple: we are, as Philip did, to invite others to, *"Come and see."* But, come and see what? That is really the crux of the issue.

To help put this story into context, let's see what John has told us so far in his gospel. From the very beginning of his Gospel, John makes it clear who Jesus is. Jesus is the Word made flesh who came to bring light to the darkness. He is the *"Lamb of God"* who takes away the sins of the world and the One and Only, full of grace and truth. Immediately before our reading for today, we see John the Baptist, who came to prepare the way for the Christ. When Jesus finally arrived on the scene, John pointed out Jesus to two of his followers, Andrew and an unnamed disciple. Jesus invited them to follow him, and they did, spending the whole day listening to the teachings of Christ. What was the first thing Andrew then did? He went to tell his brother, Simon Peter, telling him that they had found the Christ. Peter went with him. Jesus was beginning the gathering of his disciples.

John then picks up with the calling of Philip. Philip, being from the same town as Andrew and Peter, in all likelihood knew them. Whether or not they had born witness to Christ we don't know; nevertheless, Jesus found Philip and with a simple invitation, said to him, *"Follow me."* John then tells us that Philip went and found Nathanael to tell him the good news that he had found the One written about in the Scriptures. He had found the Messiah.

Philip, however, was met with a little resistance from Nathanael. He wasn't as eager to jump up and go as was Peter. You can't really blame him; throughout the centuries, many false Messiahs had arisen. Many claims had been made and the hopes of Israel had been built up only to be dashed to pieces when the truth became known. Nathanael wouldn't buy into it so easily. "*Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?*" he protested. It wasn't that Nazareth had a bad reputation as a town... it simply had no reputation at all. Nazareth was just there. Nathanael's response to the news that the Messiah was from Nazareth would be like your response if I told you that the next president of the United States was coming from some Podunk little town in Missouri that's little more than a wide spot in the road. Your first response would be, "*from where?*"

Philip's response is interesting though. He doesn't come up with smooth and convincing arguments. He doesn't use peer pressure or entice him with coming and having a good time. He simply answers Nathanael's protest with, "*Come and see.*" What did he want Nathanael to see? The answer is obvious: he wanted him to come and see Jesus, to sit at his feet and to hear his words. He wanted him to see the One who had come to redeem Israel. He wanted him to see and to hear the words of the One who had the words of eternal life.

Nathanael did, and upon meeting Christ, hearing the Word made flesh speak, Nathanael declared, "*Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.*" No gimmicks. Nothing spectacular. Just a simple invitation and the Word of God brought Nathanael to faith. An invitation to see Jesus and Nathanael believed. It almost seems too simple, doesn't it?

Yes, it does. The simplicity of God working through his word has been a stumbling block for many in the church for centuries. When it comes to evangelism, we think it needs to be more complex. We feel we need to develop the right plan, the right method, the right angle, the right "*hook*" or the right "*sales pitch*" to make it work. However, Jesus simply works through his Word. Yes, he does use us to speak his invitation, but they are still his words. Scripture is clear about that, yet, our reaction is almost like that of Nathanael's to Nazareth. "*Words! Can anything good come out of words?*"

About twenty-five or thirty years ago or so, in response to an overall decline in church membership, some within Christianity began to venture into what has been called "*church growth principals.*" Largely based on the research of a man name George Barna, they surveyed the unchurched, essentially asking them this question, "*What would make you come to church?*" The response was that the church needed to get rid of doctrine. Doctrine is boring. Make worship more entertaining because worship is boring. Instead, use skits in place of sermons, bands in place of organs and soft rock type music instead of hymns. The unchurched also said to make the messages simple; avoid deep Biblical truths and focus on everyday living. Give me something to take home so I can be a better husband, wife, mother, son or daughter. Oh, and avoid too much sin and damnation talk; that's a real bummer. By the way, make sure it is dynamic because I have a short attention span. In other words, the unchurched will come the more you make the church not look like church.

In a sense, the survey of the unchurched found this: if you want them to come to church, then don't have church. And, you know what? It worked. Many churches stopped having church and guess what? The people came. But, do you see the irony in this. The unchurched, those who weren't going to church in the first place and have no idea what Christianity is all about, were dictating not only what the church needs, but what they need. That is like the cancer patient telling the doctor what treatment he needs to be cured.

And here is where you and I can get easily fooled. If it works, why not try it? If it brings people in the door, what could possibly be wrong with it? Granted, this method of marketing works in terms of bringing in the numbers and filling the pew; however, is the great commission of Christ merely about bringing in numbers? Or, is it about people coming to faith in Jesus Christ? If the church is completely pragmatic in its approach to evangelism, meaning, if we do things simply because they work, you have to ask the question, "*To what are you really converting people?*"

What is wrong with this approach to evangelism is this: at its very basis it denies the biblical truth that God's works through his Word to bring men to faith. It doubts that his Word is effective in and of itself and believes that we sinful humans can add to its effectiveness. It is very easy for us to fall into this trap because what I fear, is that many of us doubt the ability of God's Word to work on its own; after all, they're only words. How effective can words be?

Somehow, we feel, that we are smarter than that and that our ways will work better, thinking that we must supplant and help out God's word. It is so very easy to think that we have to woo and cajole someone into believing, or, at least attending. Well, we don't. The power of God's Word brings men to faith, not a soft rock band or a big screen TV in chancel. All that does is over shadow the message of the cross. . . often to the point where the cross is completely obscured. And, once you have obscured the cross, you've lost the message of salvation.

Interestingly enough, you get a completely different picture when you ask new converts what actually brought them into the church. Recently, Thom Rainer, the dean of the *Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism and Church Growth* did some research which completely differed from what had been done in the past. He thought it seemed strange to ask the unchurched what would bring them. So, instead he surveyed those who recently made the transition from unchurched to church. Do you know what influenced their decisions? 90% said the biblical content of what is preached was the number one reason. The content was number one. Do you know what was number two? Well, remember that old, boring doctrine, 88% cited it as the second reason for joining. Worship styles and music ranked near the bottom of importance at 11%. What does this tell us? It tells us God's Word works, which should be no surprise to us because he promises that it will work. 1 Peter 1:13 is clear where the credit lies, "*For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.*"

Why we continually believe that God cannot work this way is amazing to me. The apostle Paul makes this point abundantly clear in 1 Corinthians 2: 4-5, "*My message and my*

*preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.*" Our faith rest on the power of God's word. The message of Jesus Christ and him crucified for our sins and risen to give us new life is what brings men to faith. Not our ability to persuade with wise words.

So where does that leave us? It leaves us in the same position as Philip. We, like Philip, having been saved by Christ, simply invite others to, "*Come and see.*" We invite them not to see the pastor and not to simply come to worship because they might "*enjoy*" it. We invite them to "*come and see Jesus.*" That can be done through the simplicity of a pastor's sermon or through God's Word which so richly fills our liturgy, which literally bathes the hearer in God's Word. And through his Word, Jesus works, one person at a time, leading them as he led you, to see that he is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Jesus works through his word, leading them as he led you to the cross, where in his shed blood, forgiveness and salvation are found. Your job, or perhaps better said, your gift to give to others, is a simple invitation. "*Come and see. Come and see Jesus!*" And then, do Jesus a favor, get out of the way and let God's Word do its marvelous work. In Jesus' name. Amen.