

Come and See
John 1:35-50
January 15, 2012

Football fans are fully engaged in their sport this weekend, gathering around their big screen television sets, eager to witness the triumph of their favorite team. The invitation goes out to friends and fellow fans, “Come and see the game today!” Fans have an amazing amount of enthusiasm, passion, and devotion to their team. They proudly display their team’s logo on their clothing and cars and even fly flags in front of their homes. There is no reluctance to boldly share the good news about the team they adore.

We are just three weeks from Christmas Day, having celebrated what Christians believe is the greatest gift God has given to humanity – Jesus the Christ. This morning in John’s gospel the first disciples are just being introduced to Jesus. They have been following John, Jesus’ cousin, who knows that he is only the opening act. When Jesus comes along, John points to Jesus and directs his followers to One for whom they have been waiting. He says, “Go and see Jesus and he will fill your hearts with joy and your lives with meaning.”

John’s disciples are curious enough to investigate. Jesus notices their interest and asks, “What are you looking for?” The disciples don’t seem to know how to answer this question. They didn’t necessarily initiate this encounter; they’re coming to Jesus upon the recommendation of John. So they awkwardly ask, “Rabbi, where are you staying?” Jesus graciously responds, “Come and see.” He offers the invitation, “Come and see where I live, how I live, what I value. Come and spend some time with me. Come and be a part of my life, so that I might be a part of yours.”

What the disciples experience in Jesus’ presence was so exciting that they immediately went and share the experience with others and invite them to meet Jesus. Andrew goes to his brother, Simon, “We have found the Messiah!” Andrew leads Simon to Jesus, who immediately recognizes his gifts and offers him with a new name, a new identity: Peter. The next day Jesus picks up Philip, who in turn invites Nathaniel to tag along. Nate is a bit more skeptical, even a bit prejudiced, wondering if anything good can come out of Nazareth, a backwater town of peasants. But Philip persists, “Come and check him out for yourself. Give him a try.” Nate goes and his character of honesty and integrity is immediately recognized by Jesus. The sheer presence of Christ draws Philip and Nathaniel into relationship. There is an experience of mutual attraction, for Jesus offers something comforting and hopeful which touches them in the depths of their being. Jesus also expresses a sincere desire for them to be a part of his life.

A key theme is invitation: “Come and see.” Jesus initiates the invitation, inviting people into relationship, “Come and see. Follow me.” The initiative is contagious, for those who follow him invite others, “Come and see.” A natural consequence of a meaningful experience is the desire to share it with others.

Our faith in God as we know God through Jesus Christ is undoubtedly among the most meaningful experiences of our lives. It is something worth sharing, and yet that many of us have a difficult time sharing our faith. It is often hard to put into words an experience of the heart. We may not feel sufficiently grounded in our spiritual journey to be able to talk about it with confidence or to answer questions that might be posed. We are afraid of being rejected or ridiculed for being persons of faith. We know that many people have been turned off by evangelistic techniques that have sadly closed their minds and hearts to an experience of faith. Aware of the multicultural and multi-religious world in which we live, we also want to be respectful of others whose faith is just as significant to them.

In the spirit of Jesus and Andrew and the first disciples, today we’re going to consider why and how we share our faith with others.

Sharing the Christian faith does not mean that we are persuading others to adopt a point of view, but rather we are pointing others to the person of Jesus Christ.¹ Upon meeting Jesus, Andrew finds his brother Simon and points him to Jesus. Philip meets Jesus and points Nathanael in Jesus’ direction. In sharing our faith we speak of our experience of a person, not a point of view. We are not introducing others to a plan or proposition, but to a personal relationship with Christ who offers health and wholeness.

Jesus doesn’t call people to a religion. Jesus calls people to himself and to his reign. The purpose of organized religion is to facilitate the relationship between Christ and people. Unfortunately the church sometimes loses focus of that high calling of making Christ known.

God initiates relationship with us, boldly becoming incarnate in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Just as God comes in human form to make love visible, the best form of faith sharing takes place person to person. The majority of people come to a community of faith because someone personally invites them. A friend or neighbor cares enough about the state of their soul that they encourage them to enter into a nurturing community of faith.

We share our faith because we’ve found it answers significant needs. The late, distinguished Methodist theologian Albert Outler listed four fundamental needs we all share:

1. Identity – the need to know who we are;
2. Liberty – the need to be free;

3. Productivity – the need to feel and know our lives count for something;
4. Serenity – the need to be content with a sense of fulfillment in life.ⁱⁱ

We share our faith because we believe a personal relationship with God through Jesus can meet those needs in a very real way.

The apostle Paul was one of the most effective evangelists for the gospel. He never met Jesus in the flesh, but Paul had a powerful encounter with the risen Christ that changed the direction of his life. His calling was transformed from persecuting Christians to calling people to follow Jesus Christ. In the letter to the Romans, he is summarizing his career and says, “I don’t dare speak about anything except what Christ has done through me to bring about the obedience of the Gentiles. He did it by what I’ve said and what I’ve done, by the power of signs and wonders, and by the power of God’s Spirit” (Romans 15:18-19 CEB). By what I’ve said and what I’ve done, by word and deed. Those four words give us direction for how to share our faith.

Making a verbal witness, speaking words, offering a spoken testimony is a common way of sharing our faith. This is what the first disciples did – they shared the gospel in word – preaching, teaching, writing, witnessing, telling, and inviting.

I can hear you thinking, “Well, I am not a preacher, so I cannot be a witness.” We’ve tended to leave the business of sharing the faith to professionals. Isn’t that what we pay the pastor to do? George Hunter says that the pastor often lacks the credibility of most pre-Christian people. “The day you get ordained, you lose half of unchurched people. They now perceive you as a paid propagandist for the institutional church.”ⁱⁱⁱ You are the ones with credibility among the folks who are raising children, coping with stressful jobs, taking care of aging relatives. As people hear and see how your faith sustains you through the trials of life, they will wonder how you cope.

Here are a few suggestions for offering an effective verbal witness to our faith.

1. Be natural – be yourself. Avoid religious clichés. Speak as you normally do.
2. Be respectful of and listen to the person with whom you are sharing. Be sensitive to their situation, feelings, concerns, and questions. Validate their experience. As Stephen Covey says, “Seek first to understand.”
3. Remember that you are not out to convert someone – the work of changing hearts and lives belongs to God with the Holy Spirit. We are called to simply share our personal experience of Christ.
4. You are a witness to the difference your walk with God makes in your life. You are not promoting a plan or program or product; you are introducing a person, Jesus Christ. You might share how Christ has made you feel whole or complete. Tell how having Christ at the center of your life has freed you

from self-imposed barriers and limitations, enabling you to live a full and abundant life. Perhaps following Jesus has motivated you to become an advocate for the powerless, the marginalized, and the outcast of our society. Share how you are able to overcome fears and anxieties through your trust in God's activity in your life. Tell how Christ provides a moral compass or sense of purpose and direction for your life. Your personal story is the most powerful witness you can make.

5. Seek common ground – not higher ground. In a *Peanuts* comic strip, Linus is carefully listening as his sister Lucy, boasts about her religious faith and her potential as an evangelist. Lucy says, "I could be a terrific evangelist. Do you know that kid who sits behind me in school? I convinced him that my religion is better than his religion." Linus asks, "How did you do that?" Lucy replies, "I hit him with my lunch box." Wrong again, Lucy! No one comes to faith through argument. A better strategy is to seek common ground, perhaps in our universal need for identity and belonging, for freedom, for meaning and contentment.

In addition to word, we share our faith through deed. Faith alive is faith lived and translated into action. St. Francis said, "Preach the gospel at all times and when necessary, use words." The book of James says, "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (James 2:17). Translating our faith into works gives faith integrity. It is often said that actions speak louder than words.

The Roswell United Methodist Church in Georgia helped in the relocation of a family from war-torn Bosnia. It was a Muslim family and the only thing they knew of Christianity was the Christian Serbs who killed two of their children, attempted to rape the mother, and slashed open the father who fell on his wife to protect her from being raped.^{iv} The Roswell congregation seized an opportunity to demonstrate a more faithful witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ by offering that family a fresh start, buoyed by the support of a loving community of faith.

Faith is shared through word and deed. In the sharing lives are transformed. The Light of Christ has come into the world and the light shines in the darkness. French philosopher Gabriel Marcel said, "I am obliged to bear witness because I hold a particle of light, and to keep it to myself would be equivalent to extinguishing it."

A little girl had only one line in the Christmas play, "I am the light of the world." But, struck with stage fright, she forgot it. Her mother, sitting in the audience, slowly and carefully mouthed the words out for her, "I am the light of the world." Reading Mother's lips, the girl announced loudly, "My mother is the light of the world!" In a real sense, so are we all, for it is through the lives and stories of real people that we see and hear the story of God's redeeming grace.

My friends, may we go forth with the passion, enthusiasm, and devotion of football fans following their teams to the playoffs. May we boldly share the good news about the team we follow, led by Jesus. May the light, love and grace of Christ shine brightly shine through our words and our deeds.

Loving God, we continue to marvel at your desire to create us and to woo us into relationship with you. We feel privileged as we consider the risks taken by Jesus in order to become one with us. As you have drawn near to us, we want to draw closer to you, O God.

Inspire us to share with others the faith that has brought meaning to our lives. We pray for those who long to know you and do not. Help us discern how to offer the invitation to meet Jesus and to taste the banquet of grace and love he sets. Make our words and actions congruent with the teachings of Christ, that Christ's light might shine through us.

Offer your guidance to all parents who seek to lead their children in the paths of faith and righteous living. Assist young people to build solid foundations for their lives.

Send your healing spirit to walk with all who struggle with diminishing health, family concerns, unemployment.

We give you thanks for Jesus' followers, including Martin Luther King, Jr., who boldly proclaim your prophetic word, reminding us of your desire for justice for all people. Forgive us for our continued failure to make all communities and people safe from violence and discrimination. Help us to stop the horror of human trafficking which diminishes the lives and spirits of thousands of children, women, and men. Move us forward into healthy pathways that lead to justice for all.

We pray for the people of Haiti as they continue to rebuild after the devastating earthquake two years ago. Replenish the strength of citizens of Haiti and of relief workers who offer leadership in that land.

In the spirit and name of Jesus Christ, the Light of the World, we lift our prayers, together praying with him....

ⁱ Rodney E. Wilmoth, *How United Methodists Share Their Faith* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), pp. 13-14.

ⁱⁱ Dr. Michael Dent, "How Can I Share Faith?" Trinity United Methodist Church, Denver, Colorado, February 9, 2009.

ⁱⁱⁱ George Hunter III, "Top 10 Reasons for NOT Leaving Evangelism to the Pastor," *Circuit Rider*, February, 1997. Quoted by Wilmoth, *How United Methodist Share Their Faith*, p. 15.

^{iv} Wilmoth, *Ibid*, p. 33.

Rev. Lori Best Sawdon
Lafayette United Methodist Church
Lafayette, CA