

## **Invitational Evangelism**

John 1:29-42

Tens of thousands of people drive by our building every week day. How many of them, driving to or from work, are even aware that there is a church here? What could make them take notice? What could make them be curious about what goes on within these stone walls?

I asked Fr. Gage to take me on a brief outside walking tour around our buildings to look at our signage. He described to me the work he has done of trying to make this place visible. He's employed a lot of creativity. He decided to have a number of large signs with a single word: *love, joy, peace, forgiveness* to emphasize the values and experiences represented by the church. It is interesting that the sign with *forgiveness* was the only one that has been deliberately defaced. He pointed out to me some of the places where we need better visibility, where we put signs out for the Christmas Show and concerts. Responsibility for our signs is one of the many areas of stewardship that Fr. Gage quietly leads at St. John's.

My favorite definition of *evangelism* is "one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread." Have we beggars found *bread* here, the bread of life? Are we telling other beggars, are we marking the spot so that they might know bread, nourishment, life is offered here at St. John's Church aplenty?

John's Gospel illustrates invitational evangelism in action. John the Baptist has been serving the *one who was to come*. He had been preparing the way, baptizing so people could repent and be ready. John didn't know who it would be, what he would look like, but when he saw the Holy Spirit descend upon Jesus he knew that this was *the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world*. John's own work took on less significance once Jesus had come. John saw that, among all those people he had baptized, this one man was different. And so he pointed out to two of his own disciples, "*Look, here is the Lamb of God!*" Those two disciples (one being Andrew) immediately left John and began to follow Jesus. Jesus stopped and talked with them. "*What are you looking for?*" he asked. They wanted to go with him, to learn from him, so they asked where he was staying. "*Come and see,*" Jesus told them. Andrew then found his brother Simon and brought him to Jesus. "*We have found the Messiah,*" he told his brother. The next day, as John's Gospel account continues, Jesus found Philip and invited him to *follow him*. Philip then went out and found Nathanael and said to him, "*we have found him about whom Moses and the prophets wrote, Jesus from Nazareth.*" Nathanael was skeptical; "*can anything good come out of Nazareth?*" he asked. "*Come and see,*" Philip invited him to discover for himself.

John the Baptist points the way to Jesus to Andrew who points the way to Simon-Peter his brother. Jesus meets Philip who brings Nathanael to him. And on and on in an unbroken chain from the original 12 to new disciples and more new disciples through family and friends and relations... an invitation to *come and see*, to come to church, to

worship, to study, to pray, to grow and to serve. That unbroken chain continues through many links from Jesus to the disciples to you and me. I call it invitational evangelism.

Who brought you to church? Who invited you to come and see? Who brought you to Jesus? Who helped you learn to pray? Who invited you to open the Bible and find life in its pages? Who invited you to grow in faith? I bet that there were a number of people who invited you to *come and see*, who have been *Andrews'* in your life.

I can think of four key Andrews in my life who helped bring me to Jesus. First were my parents who brought me to church. I don't remember there being any option. They didn't ask my brothers or me whether we wanted to come or not. They came and we were expected to come with them. It was what we did on Sunday mornings. So church became a part of me. And I was part of the church.

And yet while I believed in Christ, while I attended church and was active in the youth group I can't say that Jesus had taken hold of my life. As a parent I shudder to think of some of the things I did and the self-indulgent and self-destructive behavior I engaged in during my High School years.

The second Andrew in my life was a high school friend named Kara. Kara had become what we not always affectionately called in those days a *Jesus Freak*. At the time I cynically thought it was funny. I waited to see how long this *Jesus phase* might last in her life. To my surprise and bewilderment Kara really and truly began to change. Her hard edges became a little softer. She was kind where before she had been cynical and sarcastic. I'm sure she still had problems and challenges in her life but she was genuinely happy, even joyful. My own life was going in the opposite direction. So I asked her how being a Jesus Freak had helped her to really change. She said that all I needed to do was to ask Jesus to come into my heart, to forgive my sins and help me start anew. I was too proud to take her hand and pray with her on the spot. But I went off by myself and turned my life over to Jesus inviting him into my heart. What seemed miraculous to me is that I met Jesus that night. It wasn't me who invited him, but he who was waiting all along for me and accepted me just as I was.

Another Andrew in my life was my wife Carol. We were dating in College and Carol invited me to come with her to this little Episcopal Church that she had started worshipping at. *Come and see*, she told me. I had already fallen in love with Carol. With her that morning I also fell in love with the liturgy of the Episcopal Church.

The fourth Andrew in my life was a priest friend. Michael invited me to go on a Cursillo weekend and then to join him in an ongoing prayer and support group. Through that renewal weekend and prayer group I began to practice the discipline of daily prayer and began to develop some consistency to my spiritual life.

Who are some of the people who brought you to Jesus, who invited you to go deeper in your faith? Have you ever identified and thanked them?

One of the nicest letters I ever received was from a woman in a former parish who I gave a hard time to about doing a baptism for her baby. I didn't refuse to baptize her baby, but I did tell her that I would only baptize her baby on the condition that she was willing to commit to bringing her child up in the Church. Certainly there have been lots of people who winked at that commitment and ignored it. She had the integrity to realize that she wasn't ready to commit to raising her child in church so we cancelled the baptism. I'd forgotten the incident. But years later she wrote to let me know that largely because I took the sacrament of Baptism so seriously she came around to making that commitment not just for her child but for herself. She credited my refusal to lighten the commitment of baptism with helping her meet Christ. It's wonderful to get a letter like that. I hope you thank some of those *Andrews* who have helped bring you to Christ, especially if they didn't know that they did.

One of the reasons the Episcopal Church is not growing is that as a whole we Episcopalians tend to be pretty reticent about inviting friends to come and experience worship with us. I hope we've improved since this statistic was published but I read 23 years ago that Episcopalians on the average invite someone new to come to church with them once every 28 years.

Who have you invited lately? Who could you invite to come to worship with you next Sunday? Who could you invite to come to a Bible study or prayer group or even one of St. John's concert series? Who could you invite to come with you to the place where you volunteer to serve Christ through serving those in need? Who might like you to pray with them? Invitational evangelism starts with an invitation. Maybe someone is waiting for your invitation for them to *come and see*.

*"Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."* John pointed to Jesus. Isn't his life in our midst the *bread of life*? We meet him in this glorious space in worship. We feast on his love in the sacrament of bread and wine. We meet him in the acceptance that welcomes us just as we are and forgives us of all our sins and failings. We meet him in joyous fellowship with one another. We meet him in scripture and study. We see him shining through the transformations of what Fr. Gage calls the *"small miracles that happen here every day."* We meet him in ways we serve each other, in the ways we serve and support our children and young people and the way we serve others beyond these walls. If we beggars find the bread of life here can we not tell other beggars like ourselves where to find bread?

And what about those tens of thousands of people who drive by our building every day? Are we going to work to get their attention to let them know that Jesus is alive in this place? Can we invite them through our signs, through our web site, through advertising, through the mail, through our Christmas show, and even by personal invitation to *come and see*? *Come and see*; behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.