

Sermon for Grace and Holy Trinity Church, Richmond, VA
Epiphany 2, Year A, January 19, 2020
The Rev. Bill Queen, "Sharing Our Faith"
John 1:29-42

What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul; God, fill us with your wondrous love; God, share your wondrous love through us [~ Hymn 439]

'evangelism' is one of those words that usually causes Episcopalians to shrink out of sight beneath the pews; I think I can already detect a significant lowering of your heads; evangelism? that's something that Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses do; they go door to door and intrude upon people, making them feel uncomfortable, telling them that they're not saved

but, you know what? that is not evangelism; evangelism means, literally, 'good news-ism,' sharing something that is positive and enriching; what much of those other groups are doing is really 'bad news-ism,' telling you something negative about yourself, what you've not got, and what only they have to give to you, if you know what's good for you

true evangelism, true good news sharing, really is a very simple thing: it means sharing something, something, as I said, positive and enriching, about our faith, with someone else; Christianity presumes that our faith is such good news that, of course, we want to share it; think how often you find yourself recommending a restaurant, or a book, or a television show to a friend; "here's something I really like, I think you'd like it too"

is there anything that has enriched your life because of your faith that you'd, similarly, like to share with someone else? it's really not any different: "here's something that has really been meaningful to me, I think you'd find it meaningful too;" we all have a tremendous responsibility, as Christians, to hand on this faith that has been entrusted to us by God; it is not ours to hold onto for ourselves; it is ours to share

Jesus shows us something about evangelism in today's gospel reading (a passage you would have already read a week ago if you were following the Good Book Club's Bible study of the Gospel of John); in this morning's reading Jesus speaks what are perhaps the most powerful words we could use in

sharing our faith; can you tell what they are? just three little words: “come and see”

Jesus says this to two of John’s disciples whom John had directed to follow Jesus; “don’t take John’s word for it,” Jesus seems to be saying, “come and see for yourself if I am what you are looking for;” Andrew was one of those two, and he picks up on this kind of evangelism quickly, as he immediately goes to his brother Simon Peter and says to him “we have found the Messiah” with an implied follow up of “don’t take my word for it, come and see for yourself”

one of the fears that Episcopalians have about evangelism is that it is viewed as something not so simple as an invitation to come and see; many people think that you have to have some kind of a tract in your back pocket to hand out, or a memorized list of Bibles verses; that you have to have a sales pitch about Jesus, ready to be delivered to an unsuspecting stranger; and then you have to close the deal by getting your target to say some phrase, or agree to believe some doctrine

but it is really just as simple as, come and see; and it is not addressed to a stranger, but to someone you already know and care about; someone who through the connections of family or friendship already trusts you; come and see what kind of worship we have at our church on Sunday: the music, the preaching, the breakfast, the discussions and Bible study, the Sunday school classes for children and youth, and the children’s chapel; come and see what kind of outreach activities we offer to our neighbors: the Circles program for alleviating poverty; the Red Door ministry for sharing meals, welcome, and a place for community for those who have no food, no homes, no community; the Episcopal Campus Ministries where we welcome VCU students and help them navigate an enriched life beyond that of classes and papers and exams; and the dental and vision ministries we conduct in Belize; come and see; don’t take my word for it, come and see for yourself how something bigger than any one of us is at work; come and see how God is working in us, and through us, and around us; come and see

or maybe even this kind of invitation is too much of a stretch for you; if so, Jesus shows us another approach to evangelism in today’s gospel reading where he asks a simple question that we too can use as an easy, first step, in leading up to sharing our faith; and what is that simple question? just five little words: “What are you looking for?”

such a simple question can lead to a deep spiritual conversation; what are you looking for in your life? is there something missing? is there something more you might desire than money, or possessions, or happiness, or success? do you ever pursue matters of faith and belief in casual conversations you have with family members, friends, or acquaintances? again, those people you already have a relationship with

we may be afraid to broach faith matters, especially in our current national climate where faith words and faith beliefs have become narrowly partisan or downright mean; but if we, as Christians, as followers of the Way of Love, as workers for the Beloved Community, don't try to reclaim open, accepting, and grace-filled conversations about important spiritual matters, I don't expect anyone else in our society will

aren't there things important enough in your life of faith to lead you to be willing to bring them up in a conversation with others? again, not a doctrine, not a sales pitch, not what 'the church' or what any other person says; but those things you think deeply about; those things you wonder about; it doesn't even have to be something you are necessarily sure about; and by 'conversation' I mean a two-way dialogue, where we try to listen as much as we talk, and where we try to learn as much as we share; this implies a kind of vulnerability and openness; but it is within vulnerability and openness that the Holy Spirit finds room to work

remember that the Bible does not present a systematic theology; the Bible is a series of ongoing stories; Jesus told stories; your life of faith is part of that continuing story; each of us has our own faith story; and sharing your story in faith conversations keeps that faith story alive in today's world

think about it; your words, even if they are but musings and questionings, may be just what someone you're talking with may need to hear; think about the tremendous value you, and others around you, might receive from simply engaging in a spiritual conversation; think about risking enough to share an invitation with someone about coming along with you to see what is happening in God's community, this church; think about risking enough to share something that is near and dear to your soul in a spiritual conversation: "What are you looking for?" think about risking enough to engage with the people around you, the ones you care about, in inviting them to experience our faith firsthand: "come and see for yourself"