

## ***Three-Word Evangelism***

John 1:35-51

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There were two men who had been business partners for over twenty years. One Saturday evening they ran into each other at a restaurant. One of them asked, "What do you have going on tomorrow?"

"I'm going to play golf. What about you?"

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

The second man said, "Why don't you give up that church stuff?"

The first man asked, "What do you mean?"

"Well" said the second man, "we have been partners for twenty years. We have 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."

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Some things in life are too important not to share. Is the gospel one of those things that is too important for you not to share?

When you hear the phrase, "sharing the gospel," I bet that a word comes to mind, a word that evokes fear and trembling in most Presbyterians: Evangelism. Evangelism conjures images of impassioned preachers in football stadiums, or of people walking up to houses in the neighborhood and asking if you knew whether or not you'd be going to heaven, or of folks walking down busy streets and handing people tracts that either tell you how to get to heaven or how to stay out of that other place... In general, the Presbyterian ethos just does not include evangelism in the way many people think of evangelism. We're not door-knockers. We're not crusaders. We're not tract pushers.

But still, we are called to the task of evangelism, because some things in life are too important not to share.

In 1978 the General Assembly of the old Southern Presbyterian denomination placed evangelism on the front burner of its mission to the world. That Assembly declared two things. First and foremost, evangelism presents Jesus Christ as the only Savior and Lord; any evangelism that omits Jesus Christ is not evangelism at all. Second, the Assembly described three basic elements that constitute evangelism:

1. The proclamation of the Kingdom of God is evangelism...
2. The love of Christians one for another in the fellowship of the Christian community is evangelism...
3. The life style of the Christian person and the Christian Community in radical obedience to the biblical mandates of the Kingdom of God in the world is evangelism.

Proclamation, Christian community, and Christian lifestyle – all three are elements of evangelism. What we say about Jesus Christ, how we come together in the name of Jesus Christ, and how we live as followers of Jesus Christ--these are basic elements of evangelism.

I would add one other element to what constitutes evangelism: invitation. In today's text from the Gospel According to John, there are three words that are repeated twice, first by Jesus, and then by Philip. They are words of invitation: Come and see.

Come and see. That is what Jesus said to the two disciples of John the Baptist, one of whom was Andrew, the brother of Peter. "Rabbi," they said to Jesus, "where are you staying?" "Come and see," said Jesus. And then later on as Philip told Nathanael about Jesus, and Nathanael was incredulous that anything good could come out of Nazareth, Philip didn't argue with Nathanael. Philip simply said, "Come and see."

There is a difference between telling someone about Jesus, and inviting them to encounter Jesus. It's one thing to give someone your address when they ask where you live: "Where do you live?" "631 Magnolia Drive, in Willowbank, just a couple of blocks away from the church." But it's another matter altogether to invite someone into your home: "Where do you live?" "Come and see for yourself; have a cup of coffee, and take a look around. Take off your coat and stay awhile."

Jesus didn't give his address. He invited the two to come and see for themselves. It was an invitation not just to hear about where he lived, but even more to experience Jesus for themselves. Philip didn't try to argue with Nathanael; he simply invited Nathanael to discover Jesus by encountering Jesus personally. Come and see.

So many people think that sharing the gospel consists in the words we use that tell others about Jesus. We have to have the right Bible verses to convince someone of the gospel, or we need to have a cogent, rational argument for the gospel. But in our lesson from John's gospel, the words used in evangelism are limited to three: Come and see. You see, evangelism is less about words than it is about an invitation for people to experience the gospel for themselves. People don't just want to hear about God's love. They want to know God's love in a personal way. They want to know God's love, not by words, but in their heart.

Come and see: words of invitation for someone to enter into the world of the gospel. Ours is not the duty to convince; ours is the duty to invite. Come and see.

But with the invitation comes a responsibility. The invitation is to an experience, and encounter with God. Of the three elements of evangelism described in the statement by the old southern Presbyterian Church, two of them deal with the way Christians live our lives. How we relate to one another in the body of Christ, and how we live as individual believers--the way we live our lives is either a demonstration or a denial of the gospel we proclaim. The way we are the church says more about our faith than the words we proclaim. The way we live our lives either confirms or cancels the words we say.

In our Wednesday night Bridges class, we are studying the best-selling book, The Shack. It is a book that raises some interesting perspectives of God, some of them that align well with our faith, and others which require a bit of correction. The primary character in the story is a man named Mack. Mack is a man who believes in God, but his idea of God has been tainted by his experiences in church as a teenager. His experiences had led him to the conclusion that God is distant and impersonal. The reader gets the sense that if one heeded the call to "come and see" through the church of Mack's upbringing, one would encounter not grace and love, but wrath and punishment and disappointment.

If you were to say, Come and see, what kind of Savior would people find here?

At the other extreme you have the example of St. Francis of Assisi. One day Francis invited a novice monk to join him on a trip into town to preach. The novice was honored to get such an invitation from Francis. All day long the novice and St. Francis walked through the streets and byways, alleys and suburbs, and they rubbed shoulders with hundreds of people.

At the end of the day, the two headed back home; however, not even once had St. Francis addressed a crowd, nor had he talked to anyone about the gospel. The novice was greatly disappointed, and he said to St. Francis, "I thought we were going into town to preach?" St. Francis responded, "My son, we have preached. We were preaching while we were walking. We were seen by many and our behavior was closely watched. It is of no use to walk anywhere to preach unless we preach everywhere as we walk!"

It has been attributed to St. Francis that he once said, "Preach the gospel at all times. When absolutely necessary, use words."

Come and see: evangelism, distilled down to three words. Come and see: words of invitation, but also words that we must be willing to back up by the way we relate to one another and the way we live our lives.

Come and see: Are they words you are willing to say to others? Even more, are they words you are willing to back up with the way you live?

Do you remember the Mercedes TV commercial a few years ago that showed a Mercedes crashing into a concrete wall during a safety test? An engineer in a white lab coat walks over after the crash and kneels down to examine the damage, which is minimal. A reporter then asks the engineer about Mercedes' energy absorbing car body. After the engineer tells all about the unique design the reporter asks him why Mercedes doesn't enforce their patent on the design, a design evidently copied by several other companies because of its success.

The engineer then replies matter-of-factly, "Because some things in life are too important not to share."

It is true. Some things in life are too important not to share.

Come and see. Amen.