Sermon on Evangelism

Epiphany 2B January 14, 2024

John 1:43

Today’s gospel story is a story of evangelism.  When I talk about evangelism, Episcopalians tend to get nervous.  Maybe that’s because we think evangelism means going door-to-door telling people about the Episcopal church.  Maybe we think it means telling people the story of our spiritual journey.  Maybe we think we need to tell people why they need Jesus.  Or maybe we think it’s about telling people they’re going to hell if they don’t change their ways.  Let’s be honest – we have an uneasy relationship with evangelism because we’ve seen how other people do it, and we’re not like that.  But here’s the thing – the only way the Church (in general) and this parish (in particular) will begin to grow is through evangelism.

The Church will grow if we are intentional about living into our mission.  First and foremost, our mission is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.  Within that we teach people how to be disciples.  And in that teaching, we focus on becoming centers of Community, Compassion, Contemplation, and Culture.

All this falls from the tree of evangelism.  Unfortunately, evangelism has become a taboo word or topic lo these past many years.  That’s because we have images of people on the street waving their big floppy bibles and yelling at us.  Or images of people being forced to go door-to-door asking if they’ve found Jesus.  Or images of people proclaiming the right way to believe to avoid burning in hell for all eternity.  But that is not necessarily evangelism.  I would argue that that actually does more harm than good.

Evangelism, although primarily associated with Church, can also be seen/used as campaigning for a cause.  For instance, when I was a football official, I was an evangelist for that hobby.  I talked to anyone I knew who was in decent shape and who liked football about becoming an official.

Evangelism, then, is talking to people about joining you in something you love.  If we’re talking about something we love, why are we using evangelism to terrorize people or make them feel awful about themselves?  That’s not evangelism.

Years ago I heard a story about Episcopalians and faith that went something like this:  someone asked an Episcopalian what they believed.  The Episcopalian thought for a minute.  They wondered if they should talk about how much of the Bible they hear in church and that they are a “bible-believing” church.  They wondered if they should recite the Nicene Creed as a summary of the faith.  They wondered if they should recite the Baptismal Covenant to show how they put their faith into action.  They wondered if they should talk about how bread and wine are changed into the Real Presence of Christ during Holy Communion.  Or maybe, they thought, they should talk about how the entire service is a place of Holy Mystery where we are drawn into the presence of God.  Finally they simply said, “Come and see.”

That is evangelism.  That is inviting someone to come, participate, and learn about what you love.

If you notice, this is exactly how Jesus and those with him do evangelism.  When Jesus meets Philip, he doesn’t yell at him.  He doesn’t hit him over the head with a big floppy Torah scroll.  He doesn’t tell him he’s going to burn in hell for incorrect beliefs. He simply says, “Follow me.”  Earlier in the Chapter when he meets two people who want to know where he’s staying, he says, “Come and see.”

Today when Philip tells Nathanael about Jesus, Philip says, “Come and see.”  And when Jesus is talking to Nathanael, he tells him that he will see great things.

Jesus asks Philip to follow him because he wants to show him what a life in perfect relationship with God could look like.  Philip tells Nathanael, “Come and see,” because he’s excited about how this man has the ability to change lives and he wants to share that good news.  When Jesus tells Nathanael he will see great things, he isn’t necessarily talking about miracles (there are only seven in the gospel), but more about how Jesus will be revealed as the Son of God.

This is how evangelism is supposed to work.  It works by inviting people to experience what you experience.  It works by wanting to share what you love.  It works by leading people and showing them why this is important.

“Come and see” is a much more effective evangelism strategy than, “Turn or burn.”

But for “Come and see” to work, we have to know a few things.

First, what is it about Jesus that you find compelling?  You need to know that before you ask anyone to join you on this journey.

Second, what is it about this place – St. Luke’s and the Episcopal church – that draws you in and makes you want to stay?  TEC isn’t for everybody, and that’s okay.  Why is it okay for you?  It’s important to know why you are here before you ask anyone to come and see.

Third, how have you experienced God in this place?  If there’s something compelling about Jesus, and you believe this place helps you articulate that, then I hope those things have led you to an ongoing experience of God.

Having answers to these three questions will better equip you to both ask people to come and see, and to have an answer when they respond, “Why should I?”  We can’t answer for them, all we can do is give our honest answers as to why we are here.

We are in the season of Epiphany.  We are in the season of manifestation and revelation.  We are in the season of learning the true nature of Jesus.  This is something that, to be quite honest, must be learned by each person individually.

As we learn the answers to these questions and have our own experiences of manifestation and revelation, we can help reveal Christ to others by saying, “Come and see.”

Amen.