

"IT'S EASIER THAN IT LOOKS"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

Word of mouth is the best advertising. Everybody knows that. It's almost a truism.

I read somewhere recently that Hershey chocolates advertise now, but for years they didn't. They became famous; in fact their name became generic for chocolate bars, by word of mouth.

That's also true of the Church. But not everybody knows that. Every study of why people attend church reveals the same thing. Most people come to Church because a friend passed the word. Word of mouth is the best advertising.

PASSING THE WORD

Our text for this morning is from the Gospel of John, and it's about that! It's about passing the word. Only John doesn't call it advertising; he calls it evangelism. Most of us shrink from that word, evangelism. We can't see ourselves as evangelists. We've been buttonholed, at some time or another, and we've said to ourselves, "But I can't do that."

One morning several years ago I was sitting upstairs in my study, reading some material and getting ready for a meeting when I was distracted by what sounded like somebody shouting outside. I went to the window, looked out, four stories down to the sidewalk below. There was a young man with what looked to me like a Bible in his hand, pacing back and forth. He was doing the shouting. To nobody. I thought, he's an evangelist, spreading the word.

It was cold out there, down in the 20's that day. Once in a while someone would pass by him, their shoulders hunched against the cold. They wouldn't even look at him, he just kept shouting. Most of the time he was preaching to the lamp post. From where I was I really couldn't understand what he was saying. I could only hear inarticulate noise and see a lone man's voice condensing in the cold air, shouting, "Repent!" to a disinterested world. If that's evangelism, I can't do that. I can't preach on street corners. I think you have to be a little crazy to do that.

There is another image of the evangelist equally uncomfortable for me. He doesn't shout on street corners; he corners you instead and gives you a quiz. He asks, "Do you believe this? Do you believe that?" One said to me once, standing in my doorway, "Do you believe the Bible is the Word of God?" Well, I'm a preacher, for crying out loud. What am I going to say? I said, "Yes". He said, "Do you know what is in Thessalonians 4:16?" He's got me now, because I have no idea what it says in Thessalonians 4:16. I've read it, but I don't know it by the numbers. He makes me feel like a dummy, like I don't know the Bible at all, which I think is what he intends to do. You see, evangelism for him is a debate. He figures that if he can score a point then he can convert a soul.

I don't think that kind of evangelist is crazy, I think he's angry. His anger is more evident than his love. He evangelizes by intimidation. If that's what evangelism means, I can't do that. It's not in me. I have no desire to defeat people using scripture as a weapon. I don't want to do that. I don't even like to debate religion. I know what I believe, and I believe it's sufficient for me, and I feel no calling to convince anybody else that

what they believe is wrong, or that they are going to hell because they don't believe what I tell them they have to believe. I can't do that. It's not in me. So I conclude I'm no evangelist. Let somebody else do that.

CALLING OF THE DISCIPLES

And then I come to this passage from the Gospel of John, the calling of the disciples. It's about evangelism, you know. That's what it's about. You can't get around it. It's about how people come to Jesus. It says it's easier than you think. It's one person telling another person, "Come and see." What it reveals is that evangelism is easier than you think.

Let's look at the scene once again. John the Baptist walking down the road with two of his disciples. He sees Jesus and says, "Behold, the lamb of God". That's the announcement of who Jesus is. John's two disciples, out of curiosity, follow Jesus. Jesus turns and asks them, "What do you seek?" They say, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" Jesus says, "Come see." And they do, and stay with Him for the rest of the day.

Now one of the two men who had been with Jesus during that time was Andrew. Andrew is Peter's brother, only at this point in the story Peter is called Simon. So Andrew went to his brother, Simon, and said, "We have found Him, the Messiah. Come and see." And Andrew brought Simon to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, "So you are Simon. From now on you will be called Peter."

Now that's the Fourth Gospel's version of what evangelism looks like. The announcement is made to the world. The Messiah is here. Two men go to see for themselves. One of them goes to tell a third, and brings him to see for himself. That's what evangelism means in the original sense of the word; spreading the good news. It's done by word of mouth, one person telling another person,

"I have found something that is important for me. Won't you come and see if it means that to you?"

There's no arguing and there's no shouting. There's no heavy theology that you have to swallow in order to be safe. There's just one person telling another person, "I have stumbled onto something, and you might be interested. I'll take you when you're ready to go." Or, "Worship every week has added a dimension to my life that wasn't there before. If you want to see what it means for you, I'll take you." Or, "I thought I knew all there was to know about Jesus and about God and the Christian life because I went to Sunday School. But lately I have attended a class and I tell you, I have a new way of looking at my life. It's like seeing for the first time. I'll take you." That's evangelism, according to John. It's not that different than passing the word about a good restaurant. It's telling someone where they can be fed.

MARK'S VERSION COMPARED TO JOHN'S

It's interesting to compare Mark's version of this incident with that of John's account. It's different. In fact, it's very different. It's even contradictory to what John says was the way it happened.

According to John, you remember that Andrew and maybe even Peter, too, were first disciples of John the Baptist. And John says Andrew found Jesus first, and it was Andrew, according to John, who first claimed Jesus was the Messiah.

Well, Mark doesn't tell it that way. He tells it differently. According to Mark and all the other Gospels, Andrew and Peter were not disciples of John the Baptist, but they were fishermen. And they didn't find Jesus; Jesus found them. And it wasn't Andrew who first called Jesus, "Messiah"; it was Peter. And it wasn't at the beginning of the story; it was near the end.

I thought I had better warn you about that. The Gospel writers, you see, all tell the same story, but they all tell it differently. And the Church put all four of those Gospels right next to each other, back-to-back in the New Testament to tell us something -- that Jesus is going to be seen differently by different people. He'll mean something different for you than He will for me. What He means for you will probably be determined by your needs and your circumstances. The same for me. So all you can say is, "Come and See". See what He means for you.

I don't know if you've ever had this experience. I have: going back to the Bible and reading the same story many times. And every time I read the Bible I find something new there, something I didn't see before, in the same story. Nobody changed the story while I was away from it; I changed. I'm different now than I was then. I didn't see it before because I wasn't ready then.

FOUR GOSPELS AND A COMMON LORD

There are four Gospels in the New Testament with four differing interpretations of who Jesus was because we are all different, with different needs. That's why you shouldn't judge anybody else by your own experience, because we're all different. Pluralism isn't something that we invented in the Methodist Church. You read the Gospels and you will see that it has been there right from the beginning. Of course, we Methodists have capitalized on it. We're proud of our heritage of diversity. We are not all alike. We call ourselves "The United Methodist Church". We should call ourselves, "The Barely United Methodist Church". Some have only one thing in common with anybody else in the Methodist Church, and that is we follow Jesus. We're going in opposite directions, but we stick together because we have a common Lord. We stick together, in the word of John Wesley, because we believe that what unites us in Christ ought to be stronger than whatever divides us. And..

What I want you to see is that it has never been any different than that. And that is why the Church put four Gospels in the New Testament, not one authoritative one that's going to be the way everybody has to look at Jesus. We come to Jesus as we are and He speaks to us, as we are.

ALBERT SCHWEITZER

Albert Schweitzer wrote something that I'm going to share with you in a few minutes. He says the same thing so eloquently, but before reading it I want to say something about Schweitzer. I have discovered that a lot of people have never heard of Albert Schweitzer, and many have forgotten who he was. He died twenty years ago this month on September the 4th and I feel it's appropriate to say something to you about him.

His life was changed by seeing a statue commemorating the mission of the Church in Africa. It showed an African coming out of a block of stone, struggling to be free. And seeing that statue, Schweitzer felt called to Africa to be a missionary, to what in those days was called the "dark continent".

And he described that experience in language that is simple enough to have come right out of the Gospels. He simply said, "Jesus sent me".

Now before this happened he had already earned a considerable reputation as an organist and as a scholar in Bach. In fact, his two-volume study of Bach, published in 1905, still remains a classic in the study of that great composer. And then, because of his calling, he went to seminary to become a minister and The Quest For the Historical Jesus was his doctoral dissertation. It became a watershed in the study of the Bible. Published one year after he published the Bach study. Modern Biblical scholarship begins with that book which means that by the time he was 31 he had written two watershed books in two unrelated fields. It's amazing. What did you accomplish by the time you were thirty-one? I ask myself the same question?

Having done all that, he then entered a third vocation - medicine. He went to medical school, became a doctor, spent the rest of his life in a primitive hospital in Lambarene, what was then called French Equatorial Africa, because Jesus sent him.

The book, The Quest for the Historical Jesus, was a survey of all the biographies that had been written about Jesus up to that time. His conclusion was that it is impossible to write a biography of Jesus because we can't get back to the historical Jesus. All we can get back to is the testimony of those who knew him, and therefore all we can know is what Jesus meant for them, and each experience is different. That's why he wrote these moving lines:

"He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old,
by the lakeside, He came to those men who knew Him not.
He speaks to us the same word, 'Follow thou Me!' and sets
us to the tasks which He has to fulfill in our time. He
commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise
or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the con-
flicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in
His fellowship, and as an ineffable mystery, they shall
learn in their own experience who He is."

FOLLOW-UP That's why evangelism can only be, "come and see". It's not arguing, it's not shouting, it's inviting. It's what Andrew said to Peter. "I have found the Messiah. Will you come and see if He means that for you?". I tell you, you don't have to be a theologian to do that. You don't have to know the Scriptures by number to do that. You don't have to be a Saint to do that. All you have to do is be yourself and say, "I have found something that I can't quite adequately describe, and it's got a hold of me, and it hasn't given me all the answers, either. And it hasn't made me a perfect person. I am still on my way, but on my way I have found direction and encouragement and sustenance. Won't you come and see?"

We start a new season now in our Church. I'd like to encourage each of you in the coming days to be an evangelist and to share the word with some of your friends. We're all on a spiritual journey, even though we may not identify our lives that way. Most people I know are looking for meaning and purpose - yes, for God in their lives. Most are looking in the wrong place.

Our text for today says that you can be the means, if you will, that will guide somebody else to Christ. You can do that. God can use you. You may

not feel that you are equipped to do this. You may not feel worthy. You may not see yourself as an evangelist, but God doesn't need an evangelist to accomplish His will. All He needs is a word. The opening word. He'll take it..

The word may not work. Nothing may come of it. The person you speak to may still be searching someplace else. But they are ready to start a journey, if they are wondering maybe there's more to my life than what I have found. If they are beginning to recognize that maybe there's a power beyond my own power, then your word "Come and see" may be like one explorer telling another that latitude and longitude of a treasure waiting to be discovered.

CLOSING Some time ago I taught a class, after which I received a gracious thank you from a woman who attended the class. She wrote, "For the first time I discovered who Jesus really is. I no longer think of Him as just a figure in the past, but somebody real in the present, who has challenged me to live a better life".

Well I was flattered having received that note, until I realized that there were many others who attended the first session of that class and never came back, and other who attended every session of the class and slept through the whole thing. But there was one who received the invitation to come and see, and she said "yes". She was looking for a Messiah. I was the teacher, but I didn't invite her. Somebody else invited her. Somebody else said, "Come and see" I didn't say it. I'll.. change that. Somebody else said this. "You know, there's a class at the Church. You want to come?" That's all that was said, but I believe that in those simple words was another voice - the voice that Andrew heard long ago saying, "Come and see." It made a difference in his life.

PRAYER Lord, we know it made a difference in his life and it can make a difference in our lives, too, if only we'll let go and listen.. and respond. Make us each sensitive to your nearness, O God, in these moments and speak to each of us that word...help us to reach out to others and to share the joy and the love that we feel when we slow down and put ourselves in touch with you, as you have come to us in Christ Jesus, Our Lord.