

A colleague posted on a clergy Facebook page, “Well, who’s got something new to say about John the Baptist?” If you’ve been in church through Advent and even up to last week, you know we’ve had quite a few Gospel lessons telling the story of John and his preparations for Jesus. It starts to feel a little repetitive, but luckily each portion of text we’ve read has had its own nuance.

Today’s account of John comes from the *Gospel* of John (incidentally, these are not the same man). Words mean a lot to this Gospel writer and he is particular about the words he chooses. Any miraculous deed Jesus does, for example, is called a “sign” and not a “miracle” because they only serve as signs that point to the power of God. So, in his telling of the story of John the Baptist or Baptizer...he never calls him that. John is not the baptizer...he is the *witness*.

What does a witness do? They *testify*. They testify to what they have seen and heard and know to be true. John’s testimony is what he declares as Jesus comes walking towards him: “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” The next day, he does the same thing! He sees Jesus and calls out, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” His testimony is so compelling that even two of his own disciples begin to follow Jesus.

The idea of Christian witness, of *our* witness, is a complicated issue. What should our witness consist of? How should we share it? Who should we share it with? What are the best strategies? These are arguments and discussions that fill evangelism committee meetings around the world. The thing is, no one idea or style works in every culture or in every time period.

There used to be a time in this country when the most effective evangelism you could do would be to walk around the neighborhoods closest to the church and introduce yourself, maybe bring along some nice baked goods, and invite someone to your church. This just isn’t the case anymore. The drop-in culture that used to exist, when you might expect someone to stop by unexpectedly at any time has changed.

Nowadays, most people don’t appreciate an unanticipated visitor. They’d prefer to have time to pick up the house or get changed out of their sweats, or maybe they are just enjoying a day at home and don’t want to interact with other people. More and more folks don’t want to answer the door at all if they don’t know ahead of time that someone is coming by. You can see, then, why this door-to-door strategy just doesn’t work as well anymore. The well-meaning congregation members doing this work often come off as pushy or intrusive when before they would simply come off as friendly.

So, you’re probably asking, well, what then? What are we supposed to do? What strategies *do* work?

I wish I could give you a ten-point list of things to do that would get this church full and bursting. ...but I can’t. No one can. Evangelism is an experimental process and the goal

should *not* be more members for the church. The goal of evangelism should be that more people are able to experience the love of God. If that compels or encourages them to attend worship with us, great. But that's not the purpose. And if we approach evangelism with a "butts and bucks" mentality, we will almost certainly fail.

People can sense when they are being used, when others aren't being sincere with them. If we are just angling for warm bodies, we are missing the point entirely. We are sent out to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus simply so that others might know what a loving God we have—nothing more, nothing less.

All that being said, perhaps we need to look at Jesus' own strategy in John's gospel.

As Jesus is walking by John, John yells out that this is that Lamb of God. Curious, two of John's disciples end up following Jesus. Eventually Jesus turns around sees them following him. He asks them, "What are you looking for?" They ignore his question and respond with, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" And what does he say in response? "Come and see."

Come and see.

Such a simple phrase and yet it ends up being all these first disciples need. They came and saw and then later told others about their experience and those others also came and saw. Jesus' first disciples came about as a chain reaction of coming and seeing and then witnessing to it all.

So, let's expand on that. What might it look like for us to invite someone to come and see? What might be contained in that?

Of course, there's the obvious answer: we might invite someone to church, to come and see what God is doing here, in this place, when we gather for worship. That, for some folks, can be a powerful way of witnessing. Maybe they are looking for a church home. Maybe they are searching for a worshipping community that they can enter into. For those folks, an invitation to worship might be just the thing!

For others, though, the worshipping body might not be the thing that helps them see God the most. If we invite them to come and see, where else could we invite them to see God at work? Where else might they encounter Jesus?

Maybe it's in volunteering! Maybe you help put together lunches for Richmond Friends of the Homeless and invite someone to help you out. Maybe there's another organization you give your time to. Maybe you meet up on Saturday mornings with the men's group or Esther Circle. Maybe you just want a friend to go shopping with you while you pick out food to bring in and donate or while you're buying gifts for Christmas Mother. It could be as simple as that—doing something that you feel called to do in service to others and letting someone else bear witness to it.

Maybe, more than that, it's just the way you live your life: the way others *see* you live your life. If someone were to "come and see" your day-to-day living, what would they see? Now, none of us are perfect and we all make mistakes, but what would the greater trend be? Compassion? Justice? Grace? Or selfishness, a me-first mentality, and a refusal to forgive?

In the calling of these first disciples in the Gospel of John, it is their *experiences* that lead them to Christ. They spent time with John and through that, heard his testimony about Jesus. Then, they went to Jesus and it was their encounter with him, staying with him that day, that led them to share their own testimony in turn. John's preaching was one thing...but it wasn't the only thing that led people to Christ.

There's a popular quote, often attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, maybe you've heard it before: "Preach the Gospel at all times—if necessary, use words." Our words are powerful and, for some, they can be the doorway to a life of faith or deeper engagement. But, for others, our *actions* have a far greater impact.

Think about your own life, your own faith. What first brought you to church? Maybe your parents. Maybe a friend's invitation. Maybe a sense you should come that was triggered when you drove by. Maybe something else entirely.

...but what is it that *keeps* you here? What is it that keeps you engaged with God? I'd be willing to be it isn't someone else's words. It isn't just the recounting of stories in the Bible—it's what God has done for you and what God is continuing to do in your life. You've felt the Holy Spirit moving and seen incredible things happen that can only come from God.

So, bear witness, my beloved siblings, in whatever way works for you. Live the story of God's love in your words and in your deeds. Invite the world to "come and see."

Amen.