



SUNNYVALE

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

728 W. Fremont Avenue • Sunnyvale, CA 94087
408.739.1892 • www.svpc.us • info@svpc.us

From the Pulpit

Sermon ~ *Each One Reach One*

The Rev. Dr. Steve Harrington ~ October 30, 2011

John 1:35-46

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!"

The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter).

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see."

Isaiah 52:7-10

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the Lord to Zion. Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.

Think about your journey of faith as a literal path for a moment. See it stretching back over time to when you first began to hear and learn of God's love; see how it leads from that first fledgling faith on to experiences of Christian community, worship and service. See those powerful moments when God's love was so palpable it seemed you could touch it. See your

spiritual journey wend its way through those difficult times of doubt and fear, through those dark valleys of despair when God's absence was a deafening silence in your soul. Notice the everyday and almost humdrum unfolding of your life and how God was present there also in the mystery of the mediocre.

But in particular, as you look back over your journey of faith, I want you to think about those people – those individuals – that encouraged you along the way. Think about the people who helped you experience God's love, who spoke words of encouragement to you, who invited you into – or further along in – your journey of faith. Who were those people for you?

For some of us it was our parents or another family member. Others of us will think of a particular Sunday school teacher or youth leader. A pastor or retreat speaker might come to mind. But I'm also confident that among those people who best helped and encouraged us in our journey of faith were those regular friends and even minor acquaintances who simply spoke a word, who extended an invitation, who, just by the way they lived their life and were present in ours, helped us to know and experience God's love. Right? Who were those people for you?

Like breadcrumbs dropped along the way we can look back over our journey of faith and see those people who had a touch in our life and who, in both significant moments and in small ways – in both sustained support and by their quiet examples – have helped us to grow in our lives of faith. No one person did it all and some don't even know they were part of our journey; but by word and witness, through their life and love, whether they realized it or not: they have helped us to know God better. And we give thanks for them! In fact, I would encourage you if you've got their contact information to send them a note or an e-mail this week just to thank them for their touch in your life and for helping you to grow in faith.

So, on our journey of faith there are those people who have been to us signposts along the road, who helped us to find our way forward with God. And you have been that for others! For some of us that may be hard to believe but you have! Even though you didn't have the best theological answer to that person's question; even though you couldn't think of the right Bible verse at the time; even though your prayer felt stilted and your words inadequate; even though it may seem to you that your life is a poor reflection of God, *nevertheless...* my guess is that your name also comes to mind when somebody else thinks about those people who have helped them in their journey of faith. And it *should*! In fact – and here's a sobering thought – you may be the only person who's in a position and relationship to share God's love with that friend or co-worker.

We just received into membership a class of over 30 folks – a great day for our church! And when we asked them how it was that they came to know about and become involved in this community of faith we were not surprised at the answers. I think one person said, the Yellow Pages (For those of you who have never known life without cell phones and the Internet, the Yellow Pages is a "hard copy" listing of the address and phone number of various businesses, services and churches). A few of them said they learned about our church online, from our website. But far and away the most common way that these new members said they heard about our church and had come to join the community was because a friend invited them.

Not our signs, not our advertisement in the Sunnyvale Sun, and this was a surprise to me: *not* because they had first listened to my sermons online at our website; but because one of you said, "Hey, I'd love to have you come and give my church a try because I'm finding it to be a helpful place as I try to make sense of life and seek a sense of God *in* life."

Sometimes in a big church we think that if we have enough programs and ministries that people will automatically come and join us. But people only come to what other people find

meaningful. People only come to where someone they know and trust has told them there is something of value to be found. People only come where they are invited by someone who really wants them to be there. The nationally respected Alban Institute conducted a thorough research project on why people come to church and this is what they found:

2% come because of print advertising

6% come because of the pastor (personally I was hoping for 7%!)

6% come because of an outreach program of the church

86% come because of an invitation from a friend

86% came to church because someone like you invited them!

Now, granted, not every invitation to church is welcome or done well; it can certainly be extended in a poor and inappropriate way. Pastor David Leininger tells the story about a man in a congregation who was rough and unsophisticated but who kept pestering the minister for something to do for the church. Finally, just to get him off his back, the pastor gave the man a list of 10 members who had not been to church lately and said that he could contact and invite them to return.

Not long after the pastor received a letter from one of these missing members -- a physician and prominent member of the community. In the letter was a check and a note that said, "Dear Pastor, enclosed is my check to help make up for me missing church so much. I'm sorry to have been absent but be assured I'll be present this Sunday and on each Sunday following. Sincerely... Dr. so-and-so. P.S. Please tell your secretary that there is only one `T' in dirty and no `C' in Skunk." So, yes, not *every* invitation is welcome or expressed in the best of ways. But we are called by Jesus to be gracious witnesses to God's love and to share the good news of abundant life in Christ.

A witness is not a person who tries to convince someone about a religious philosophy or browbeat them with guilt. A witness doesn't try to argue someone into becoming a Christian or point out all the ways they are wrong. A witness is just someone who naturally shares about what they have experienced because it overflows from their life. So, the person who sees a great movie and comes into work talking about it the next day is a witness. The parent (or grandparent!) with their first baby and a whole stack of pictures is a witness. The person who posts on Facebook about how amazing game 6 of the World Series was is a witness (I of course didn't see it and don't know what they're talking about -- in fact Steve Wilde had to tell me that the World Series was even being played!) But all these people are *witnesses* because they are all naturally sharing with others something they are excited about.

In John chapter 1 notice how naturally the community of faith grows; and it all begins with the simple and gracious invitation to, "Come and see." It's an invitation to explore and experience, to question and consider. It doesn't require a prior commitment or previous knowledge; it doesn't expect a certain level of achievement or a particular code of conduct -- it's just an invitation to discover God through a welcoming invitation to a relationship. Come and see.

So they came and they saw. And in that brief encounter their lives are radically transformed; so transformed that the very next morning Andrew gets up, runs off to find his brother Simon and tells him, "We have found the messiah!" And because of *Andrew's* obvious joy, Simon comes to Jesus. Suddenly Simon's life is *also* forever changed; changed so completely that he even receives a new name: Jesus calls him Petros, the rock.

Then the very next day, Jesus calls to Philip and says, "Follow me." And when Philip does he is so struck by his encounter with Jesus that, like Andrew, he goes out, finds his friend Nathaniel and invites *him* saying "We have found the messiah, he is Jesus of Nazareth!" And when Nathaniel says, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (which would be like saying,

can anything good come out of LA?), Philip answers simply with Jesus' own words and invitation: he says, "Come and see."

Every time we see Andrew in the gospel of John -- *every time* -- he is bringing somebody to Jesus. But you don't get the idea that Andrew is a flaming evangelist. He's not standing out on the street corner preaching; he's not even going around the neighborhood knocking on doors -- he just wants the people that he knows to get to know Jesus *because* Andrew knows he is the Christ.

Come and see. That's the kind of invitation to faith that I appreciate. It lets the person find their own way, at their own pace—it's the kind of church *we* want to be: we point to Jesus confident that people who respond will discover his love and grace.

But there's one crucial thing to note here. These people in John 1 are effective witnesses *for* Jesus because they have first had a personal encounter *with* Jesus. The invitation was, "Come and see." But it is clear that when they first came to Jesus, they were also *SEEN*—seen like they had never been seen before; seen for who they really were and yet loved anyway.

This is the good news of the gospel: in Jesus Christ God sees us exactly like we are, but loves us anyway! Come and see; it is the invitation to faith. Come and *BE SEEN*; it is the beginning of discipleship. Invitations that are the most compelling come from people who have experienced Christ personally in their own lives and you'd be surprised how even the most cursory of contacts can have significant results.

Ben was a student at Colorado College when I was the university pastor at First Presbyterian Church there. He would occasionally come to our meetings but, to tell you the truth, he was never very consistent or serious about his faith.

When Ben graduated I sent him a standard letter I sent to all the graduates. It said something about all the expectations that others would have of him now that he was out of school and encouraged him to listen for God rather than be controlled by people. I thought nothing more of the letter and, in fact, over the years I forgot about Ben as well. But several years ago Ben tracked me down out here in California and called me to thank me for my letter which he *still had* and which he said he had read *many times* in the past many years *and* which he proceeded to read to me right then on the phone! It was essentially a form letter!

As we talked, Ben told me about his journey of faith since college and I wrote down his words as he spoke because I was so amazed he had called. Ben said, "I loved the way you treated me. Even though I didn't always come, you always made me feel welcome. I was seeking back in college and now I have finally made a commitment of faith to Christ and I want to thank you for helping me to do that." I was blown away --amazed at how the smallest of efforts can be used greatly by God. It doesn't take much -- it doesn't have to be dramatic -- it doesn't require a degree in theology: God is able to use the smallest seeds that we plant through our prayers, our lives, and even our quickly sent out form letters.

I want to challenge you to do something un-Presbyterian: to share your faith with someone you know. You might share with them how God has touched your life. You might say to a friend in need, "I'll be praying for you." Or you might simply extend an invitation to join you here at church for worship or an upcoming event or concert. But I want to ask you to be open to God using you in some way in somebody's life *this week*. EACH ONE REACH ONE—it's how the church grows; it's how the faith is shared. Each one reach one: you may well be the only person who can make the connection for your friend. Simon had Andrew; Nathaniel had Philip; who has you?