First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

January 15, 2023

Look!

John 1:29-42 - NRSV

**29**The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! **30**This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’ **31**I myself did not know him, but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.” **32**And John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. **33**I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ **34**And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Chosen One.”[a] **35**The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, **36**and as he watched Jesus walk by he exclaimed, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” **37**The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. **38**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?” **39**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. **40**One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. **41**He first found his brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which is translated Anointed[b]). **42**He brought Simon[c] to Jesus, who looked at him and said, “You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas”[d] (which is translated Peter[e]).

This is one of those passages that packs so much into the narrative, that I can find it difficult to know where to focus my attention. There’s so much going on here, all of which is worth exploring. Do I focus on the differences between John and Matthew’s description of what happened after Jesus came out of the waters of baptism? Do I focus on the fact that John the Baptist seems to have coined the phrase “Lamb of God,” which isn’t found anywhere else in either the old or new testaments? Do I focus on the fact that John the Baptist was the first evangelist, as the writer implies in verses 34-37? Or do I focus on the fact that the author of John’s Gospel also mentions that Jesus is calling his first disciples, here.

It was a tough choice and one I struggled with all week. The commentaries I study each week, as part of my preparation, were all over the map, which given that the writer crammed so many different themes into this reading, isn’t too surprising to me.

So, I did quite a bit of praying this week, trying to get a handle on what God wanted me to say today. God answered my prayer but, to be totally honest, I wasn’t happy with the answer and really resisted it. But a few things happened that ultimately shaped my decision on what portion of this passage to preach on. First, the prayer I pray when I’m starting to prep a sermon is “God, may these words be your words and not mine.” Being open to the Holy Spirit, when I’m writing a sermon, is absolutely critical in order to ensure that my ego stays in check. The second thing that happened, was that I had a number of conversations with various people within and outside of the congregation, throughout the week, about the meaning of church membership. Both of these things made it abundantly clear where this sermon needed to go. So, folks, hang on to your hats, today we’re going to talk about evangelism. Dum, Dum, Dum!

I see some of y’all squirming in your seats and looking at your watches, wondering if you can slip out the door without being noticed. “Oh heavens!” Did I leave the iron on?” Maybe I need to go check on that.” Short answer to the question of can you slip out without being noticed, is no. That’s one of the advantages of standing where I’m standing right now. So, take a deep breath and let’s explore our discomfort with the concept of evangelizing together, shall we? For many of us, the idea of evangelism makes us uncomfortable. The word conjures up wild eyed street preachers telling us that the end is near, or the Mormon missionaries or the Jehovah Witnesses showing up unannounced at our doors. The idea of *publicly* testifying that Jesus is the chosen one, that he is the Messiah, as we see John the Baptist doing in verse 34, send shivers up the spines of many attendees of mainline churches.

I know, for myself, that the very public displays of piety, which often accompany these efforts to evangelize seem, at times, performative and more about showing what a good Christian someone is, rather than demonstrating any real effort to following the teachings of Jesus.

I’m reminded of Jesus’ admonition in Matthew 6:5, which reads, “*And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.”* The key phrase here is That they may be seen by others. Again, to my way of thinking, many public efforts to evangelize are too often about being seen by others. Too often, it becomes about the person, rather than the message. A popular question, in some circles, is “how many souls have you brought to Christ?” This question bugs me, because nowhere in the Bible does it say anything about believers receiving extra salvation points for playing a numbers game. Tying our “success,” as a Christian, to how many people we’ve been able to convert, turns sharing the good news into a competition, and I truly don’t believe that’s the point.

Yes, Jesus gave us the Great Commission, as outlined in Matthew 28:16-20, where he commands his disciples to share the gospel with all nations, baptizing in the name of the Father, Son, and How Spirit. And yes, in the context of the Great Commission, John the Baptist can be considered the first evangelist. Andrew and Simon Peter, after hearing the testimony of John, chose to follow Jesus. So, in that respect, John’s evangelism was successful.

But it begs the question; how do we follow Christ’s commandment to share the gospel with all nations? Well, the zero to 60 approach of street corner preaching and door to door sharing of the Good News, can be, and has been, effective for some. However, not everyone is cut out to be a door knocker or someone who can preach on street corners.

I believe there are other ways to accomplish the Great Commission, without knocking on doors or standing on a street corner. Sharing the gospel can be as simple as just inviting people to attend worship on a Sunday morning. In my experience, many folks are simply waiting for an invitation. Perhaps they won’t immediately take us up on the offer, but there is no harvest without planting seeds.

Another way to accomplish the Great Commission is to invite people to participate in programs or events. To my way of thinking, our Holiday Bazaar, the annual Soup Luncheon, Bible Study, our Christmas Eve and Easter Sunday services, as well as the various Presbyterian Women events, all count as evangelism, and can provide various entry points into the life and ministry of this congregation. My home church in Seattle has a wonderful music program, which includes a gospel choir and some very talented jazz musicians. Honestly, it was the joy of making music and the camaraderie that I experienced, being part of the music program in that congregation, which brought me back to the church and enabled me to reconnect with the Gospel.

Personally, I think one of the best ways to evangelize; the way that works best for me, is to simply be a living example of what God calls all of us to do, as described in Micah 6:8, which reads, *“When we act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God, He declares that it is good and what God requires.”*

I’ve always loved St. Francis of Assisi’s call to “Preach the gospel at all times and when necessary, use words.” I think St Francis must have had the Micah passage in mind when he penned these words.

It’s consistency that’s important here. We live in a culture that is no longer willing to overlook hypocrisy, when it comes to the message of the Gospel. Hearing the message of God’s love for all, on Sunday morning, then seeing and experiencing exactly the opposite on Monday morning, has caused far too many people to give up on the church entirely. It’s that hypocrisy, and the failure of so many Christians to live a life consistent with Jesus’ message of love and peace, mercy and justice, that has emptied out our churches and caused many people to turn away from the good news.

Here’s the thing, folks, however we choose to share the Gospel; whatever method works best for us, we are called to do so with honesty and integrity. Believe me when I say this, and I speak from personal experience; people will see right through us, if we don’t practice what we preach.

What worked for John the Baptist, may or may not work for us. Preaching on a street corner, may or may not work for us. Going door to door, may or may not work for us. There are as many ways to share the message of God’s love and grace, as there are people willing to do so. There’s no one way, and no cookie cutter method, that will reach everyone.

Our job, as followers of the risen Christ, is to find a way to share the Gospel message that is sincere and consistent with our own understanding of what that message is. How that looks for you, may be different then it’ll look for me, and that’s OK.

Regardless of what sharing the Good News looks to each of us, may we always be a people who preach the Gospel at all times, using words when necessary, AMEN