

Elevator Speech

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Pound Ridge Community Church

Second Sunday After Epiphany

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John 1:35-51

Our reading from the gospel of John is part of the familiar story of the calling of the disciples. But John often has a different perspective on things than do Matthew, Mark, and Luke. We refer to Matthew, Mark, and Luke as the Synoptic Gospels because they are so similar. But John is always going in his own direction, and this story of the calling of the disciples is no exception. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the accounts of the calling of the disciples are essentially identical. Jesus finds people and invites them, one-by-one, to follow him.

It may look like the very same thing is happening in John, but let's look again. The calling of Jesus' disciples in John begins within in the story of John the Baptist, who is standing around one day with two of his own followers. When he sees Jesus, John the Baptist says, "Look, the Lamb of God." Now, John the Baptist's confession of Jesus so intrigues the two men with him that they leave John the Baptist and begin following Jesus. The two new disciples immediately begin to ask Jesus questions about what he's planning to do. Jesus answers very simply, "Come and see!"

One of these two men, Andrew, immediately goes and finds his brother, Simon, to tell him about Jesus. And Simon becomes a follower as well. The next day Jesus found Philip, who immediately goes off to find Nathaniel to tell him about Jesus. A snarky Nathaniel wonders aloud how a savior can possibly come from a place like Nazareth. Philip borrows a line from Jesus in answer – "Come and see!"

Now, if the difference in John's account of the calling of the disciples is not apparent yet, I will spell it out. At this point, Jesus has five new disciples, but Jesus has only recruited one of them himself. The other four joined Jesus because somebody else came to them and told them about him. So, in John's gospel it is clear the ever-widening circle of Jesus' followers is not growing because Jesus is seeking people out. It is growing because Jesus' followers are sharing their personal testimony about Jesus with others.

So, what I want to suggest is that John's account of the calling of the disciples is not as much about calling as it is about something else. It's really about evangelism – sharing the good news with others. It's about evangelism, that thing that strikes fear into the hearts of many Christians, and most non-Christians as well. Evangelism evokes fear in Christians because they're afraid they'll have to

do it. And it evokes fear in non-Christians because they're afraid that someone is going to try to do it to them.

Because, let's face it: evangelism has gotten a bad rep over the years – one which is not necessarily unjustified. In modern America, “evangelism” has come to be associated with either a certain kind of intolerant, pushy, and generally unpleasant Christian, or a “televangelist” in a \$3,000 suit, asking for you to send him money. Unfortunately, Christian evangelism often doesn't fare much better in history when we consider the terrible things that have been done in the name of converting non-believers. The Spanish Inquisition comes to mind, although it is not the only example.

But at its most basic, evangelism is really just what John, Andrew, and Phillip did in today's reading. It's introducing people to Jesus. And evangelism – proclaiming the good news – doesn't have to be about standing on a street corner screaming “Repent!” at passersby, or convincing someone that they'd better listen or face an eternity in Hell. It doesn't require you to be a Biblical scholar or a crack theologian. Evangelism is as simple as being prepared to tell someone why Jesus is important in your life. Or it can be simpler still – like inviting someone to your church.

Yet as simple and non-threatening as an invitation like that is, many of us still have a hard time making it, don't we? I guess it's because most of us aren't comfortable talking about this kind of stuff. I mean, maybe we're just nervous about sharing our faith in a culture that doesn't exactly encourage it. And we don't want to come off as some kind of religious nut.

Part of the resistance is certainly geographic. About five years ago, Gillian spent a great deal of time on business in Dallas. I remember her telling me how virtually everyone she met when she was there at one time or another invited her to come with them to church. One might wonder why it is that inviting business associates to church is still an accepted and appropriate way to behave in Dallas. Then again, maybe the real question is, why is it no longer acceptable and appropriate in ours?

Of course, there is always the fear of how someone is going to react to us. I think Phillip faced that problem today. From what we know about them in the scriptures, Phillip was an unremarkable man, while his friend, Nathaniel, was something of a scholar. It doesn't say this in the reading, but I'll bet Phillip was nervous about how his learned friend Nathaniel might respond him. And Nathaniel's response was not particularly gracious. He answered out of his personal prejudice. “Nazareth? Are you telling me that the Messiah comes from Nazareth? Nothing good ever came from Nazareth!”

What if that were to happen to us? Imagine if you asked someone to come to church with you and they said, “In Pound Ridge? Pound Ridge?!! Does anything

good ever happen there?" That would not be good. You might be unlikely to invite anyone else any time soon. But even though Nathaniel shows himself to be not-so-favorably-disposed to what Philip is telling him, Philip's testimony recruits Nathaniel. That's because Philip had an answer ready. He doesn't argue with Nathaniel, or try to convince him he's wrong. Philip gives just the right answer. He simply invites him to check it out for himself.

It might be that preparation is the key. We tend to feel comfortable doing something only if we feel competent. A feeling of competency in most things comes from practicing, and most of us just haven't had much practice sharing our own stories of faith. This morning I want to suggest a way we might begin to get better at it.

This idea comes out of a past life I had years ago when I experienced an extended period of unemployment. And during that time, I was fortunate to have some "outplacement" assistance. You might have heard of that – these are "experts" in job hunting who tell you how you should be going about it. One of the things they always preached was the importance of having an effective "elevator speech" if you're looking for work. The concept of the "elevator speech" is really simple. It is a clear, concise explanation of who you are, what you do, and why someone should be interested in having you work for them.

But why is it an "elevator speech?" Well, what it's for is when you are on an elevator and all of a sudden Warren Buffett or Jeff Bezos gets on, and he's only going one floor. For that length of time, you have him captive. You have that long to get him interested enough in you to invite you for an interview.

Now, as a practical matter, even if you knew where to find Warren Buffett and you had his ear for 20 seconds, the odds that he would be so excited about you that he'd hire you on the spot are infinitesimally small. But that's not the point. The point of creating an "elevator speech" is that it forces you to reflect deeply about who you are, what you do well, and what you want, so that you can articulate it quickly and clearly. Knowing what you would say in advance helps you be less nervous if Jeff Bezos actually does get on an elevator with you.

So maybe the key to becoming effective witnesses to the importance of Christ, our faith, and the church in our lives is preparation. Perhaps the way we can feel more competent in those "elevator moments" is to have our speech prepared. It doesn't have to be long. In fact, it's probably good if it isn't. What would your church "elevator speech" say? What is the clear, concise answer you might give when somebody asks you "why do you go to the Pound Ridge Community Church?" What is it that is important to you here? Would you mention our worship, your experience of the Sacraments, our wonderful choir? Would it be our Sunday school? Or would you be inclined to talk about ministry work that has made a difference in somebody else's life, or a change Christ has made in your own?

Now, for this exercise to be anything more than an exercise it has to be done with some objective in mind. And this is what I would like to suggest. Call it a “New Year’s Resolution.” I would like to challenge each person in the congregation to invite one person to worship this year. That’s all, just one person. Imagine what it could mean to have a hundred visitors in 2018. If we can have that many new people visit us over the next year, there is no telling what a difference it can make in the life of this congregation – or in the lives of the people we invite.

So, today I invite you to begin working on your “elevator speech.” But if words still fail you, don’t be too concerned. If somebody asks you, “Does anything good happen in Pound Ridge?” today’s gospel gives you just the right answer.

“Come and see.”