

Epiphany 2A 2020 Sermon

John 1:29-42

John saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’ I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.” And John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. 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.’ And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.”

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).

Several days ago, Christian author Cindy Wang Brandt posted a tweet which stirred up a lot of responses. Brandt, the mother of 2 young children, tweeted, “Do not evangelize a child... Your religion does not have a right to stake claim to a child’s allegiance.”¹

You can image the responses she got. Some were supportive of the tweet, sharing “their childhood experiences of having nightmares about the ‘Second Coming’ they felt threatened with, or being told they were ‘going to burn forever unless [they] said a prayer.’

“Others challenged Brandt, pointing to Scriptures encouraging parents to ‘train up a child in the way he should go.’ [Proverbs 22:6]

“Evangelical radio host and author Eric Metaxas quoted the tweet, adding, ‘Would it be all right with you if I taught my kid that stealing, murdering, lying, racism, and slavery were wrong?’”²

University of Notre Dame professor Christian Smith, who co-authored the book *Religious Parenting: Transmitting Faith and Values in Contemporary America*, notes that “Historically, religion has been part of being socialized into a tribe or

people or nation... That has changed in the modern era, as religion has become much more individualized...

“Even though parents want to model and teach stuff,’ Smith says, ‘they’re really afraid of overdoing it — like they don’t want to “shove [their faith] down their [child’s] throat,” so to speak. It’s a phrase we [authors of the book] continually heard...

“So in some ways,’ Smith continues, ‘parents treat their kids with kid gloves, like “I’m not pushing [my Christian faith] too hard,” which is interesting because they **will** push their kids *very* hard when it comes to homework, school behavior, having the right friends, going to music lessons, going to sports practice.’”³
(unquote)

My friends, I think that this hesitancy to “evangelize” one’s own children is symptomatic of a widespread hesitancy on the part of a large portion of Americans who believe that one’s faith is, as Dr. Smith noted, an individual, private matter, and should not be discussed in public.

In today’s Gospel from John, we read of John the Baptist. Whereas, in the other Gospels, John the Baptist is a fiery prophet preaching repentance (Luke 3:3, Matt. 3:2; Mark 1:4), in John’s Gospel, this is *not* the Baptist’s role. Instead, John the Baptist is a *witness*. We read, “John the Baptist saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! ...I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.’” John witnesses that Jesus is “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

Fr. John Shea reminds us that in the Old Testament, a person who had sinned was supposed to sacrifice a lamb “in the temple as a sin offering. This ritual lamb reestablished the relationship to God after it had been broken [by that person’s sin] (see, e.g., Lev 4:32-35; NAB, ‘lamb’; NRSV, ‘sheep’). The sacrificed lamb was a liturgical process [which] humans constructed to overcome sin and to reunite with God.

“However, Jesus is *not* a lamb of sinful humans. Jesus is the ‘Lamb of **God**’ [which **God** gives.] The chasm between God and the world is overcome by *divine* initiative. [In one of Jesus’ *first* acts in] John’s Gospel, Jesus frees the temple animals (John 2:13-22). They are no longer needed. Temple sacrifice [offered by humans] is no longer the way sin is overcome. God and the world are permanently united in the person of Jesus, and so entering into communion with Jesus, *remaining* with him, is entering into union with God.”³

And this is what John the Baptist clearly implies, in today’s Gospel, that his two followers should do: enter into communion with Jesus, the Eternal Word made flesh. And John’s disciples, after hearing their Teacher witness repeatedly to

Jesus, leave John and follow after Jesus. Jesus then turns and asks them, “What are you looking for?” They could have answered in any number of ways. “We’re looking for the answers to life’s questions,” or “We want permanent forgiveness of our sins,” or something like that. But as it turns out, they don’t ask for some *thing*; they want to know Jesus. “Where are you staying?” they ask him. It isn’t a question about which motel or roadside inn Jesus has checked into; it is a question about where his spirit is anchored, what drives him, what he is all about, where he draws life from. This is the **right** thing to ask for; and so, Jesus invites them to “Come and see.” Jesus invites them into a personal knowledge of, and relationship with, himself. He invites them to walk the path of life with him.

Earlier in this chapter, the Gospel-writer John says, “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.” (1:18) By inviting these disciples into a personal knowledge of himself, Jesus, who is close to the Father’s heart, is also inviting them into a personal knowledge of God. John the Baptist witnesses to Jesus, and Jesus witnesses to God the Father.

So, here’s the question: How do you and I witness to Jesus in our own lives? For we *are* witnesses – good, bad, or lukewarm. As professed Christians, what we say, what we do, how we act toward others, especially the least and the lost, witnesses to Jesus, either positively or negatively. Pope Francis has said that a mature Christian is one who attracts others to Jesus. That is what John the Baptist does with his 2 disciples in today’s Gospel, and what Andrew does with his brother Simon Peter. Now, we know that people today are turned away from Jesus because of the *bad* witnessing of some who claim to be Christians. Many have been turned away from Jesus by the numerous incidents of clergy sex abuse and the consequent cover-ups; others have been turned away by “prosperity gospel” preachers who teach that following Jesus will make you rich; still others have been turned away from Jesus by Christians who confuse loyalty to a political party or candidate or nation with faithfulness to Christ.

But here’s the thing: just because there are many *bad* witnesses to Christ in our world (or perhaps better said, there are many witnesses to a distorted understanding of Christ and of God) doesn’t mean that you and I shouldn’t witness to the God of infinite compassion and love whom *we* have come to know in Jesus. In our baptismal vows, which we reaffirmed last Sunday, we promised to “proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ.” (BCP p. 305) In an age when the words and actions of many prominent Christians are turning people *away* from Christ, perhaps the best witness we can give is the witness of our lives: how we embody the love of Christ in the way we live. Mother Theresa did not evangelize by preaching, but by performing countless little acts of love, being a *living* witness, which attracted people to her and to the Christ whom she followed. She famously said, “We can do no great things - only small things with great love.” You and I, if we remain where Jesus remains, close to the heart of God, can indeed do many small things with great love, and in so

doing, be witnesses, faithful and true, to our infinitely loving, forgiving, compassionate God.

And why would any parent not want to tell – and show – their child that they are unconditionally loved by the eternal God?

AMEN

¹ <https://religionnews.com/2020/01/14/teach-your-children-well-viral-tweet-sparks-debate-over-passing-on-faith/>

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*

⁴ John Shea, *On Earth as it is in Heaven*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004, p. 56