

Texts: Is 49:1-7; Ps 40:1-12; 1 Cor 1:1-9; John 1:29-42

Theme: Jesus invites us to "come and see" and calls us to invite others to "come and see."

Introduction: The Power of Words

This past week there have been a couple of news items that have raised questions about the power of words in our society. On the one hand, commentators have raised concerns about whether or not vitriolic political rhetoric was an agent in causing a troubled loner with a gun to shoot a Congresswoman and kill six other people outside a Tucson grocery store.¹

I also happened to listen to a TV news report this past week, reporting on the increase in teenage cosmetic surgery. Most of these surgeries have to do with nose reductions or ear bobbing. Why the increase? Teenagers interviewed shared the debilitating impact on them by other teenagers making negative comments about their appearance. Apparently bullying is alive and well. And much of this bullying is coming through the power of words – very hurtful words. And these words have caused parents to risk potentially dangerous surgery because they are concerned that such bullying words will result in damage to their child's positive self-image.

How much power do words have? Mark Osler, a Professor of Law at the University of St. Thomas, has commented: *For Christians, there should be no debate on this subject. Our faith, like so many others, is built on the thesis that words do inspire action. . . . Christ had no army, he had no formal power – all he had were words.*²

On this weekend when we remember Martin Luther King, we also remember the power of his words. Words do indeed have power.

Today's Gospel

Today's gospel text emphasizes the power of words through its emphasis on speaking. In the space of just 18 verses of John's gospel (chapter 1) five different individuals come into a relationship with Jesus because the Good News of God is spoken by **word of mouth** from one person to another.

It begins with John the Baptist. He sees Jesus walking toward him and declares, "*Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*" (1:29). Two of John's disciples, one of whom is later identified as Andrew, hear John's words and follow after Jesus. When Jesus sees them following, he turns and asks: *What are you looking for?* Rather than responding directly, these two reply with a rather strange question of their own, asking Jesus, "*Where are you staying?*" Jesus, in turn, does not give them a direct answer, but simply invites them to "**Come and see.**" They do just that. They "come and see" and remain with Jesus for the rest of that day.

Next, we hear that Andrew, one of the two goes and finds his brother Simon and proclaims, "*We have found the Messiah*" (1:40-41). If we were to read the next few verses in John, chapter 1 (verses 43-46) beyond our current lectionary text, we'd see Jesus calling Philip who in turn invites Nathanael to "**Come and see.**"

This invitation to "come and see" is like a chain reaction or ripples in a pond. As these simple words are uttered, the circle grows wider: from John the Baptist to Andrew to Simon Peter; from Jesus to Philip to Nathanael. Five different individuals come into a relationship with Jesus through the power of simple words and a simple invitation to *come and see*. This is, of course, simple evangelism through simple words.

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The Death Penalty and Why the Arizona Murders Should Trouble Christians, posted Jan 10, 2011) by Mark Osler, Professor of Law, University of St. Thomas.

2Ibid.

Evangelism

In the baptismal covenant, which we all periodically renew, there is a baptismal promise that asks us: *“Will you proclaim by **word and example** the Good News of God in Christ? We all rather blithely respond: *I will, with God’s help*. I have found that many adults preparing for either baptism or confirmation find it much easier to talk about proclaiming the Gospel **by example** than proclaiming the gospel **by word**. And some studies demonstrate just how difficult some of us find proclaiming the Good News by word to be.*

In one survey of persons who claimed no church affiliation – sometimes referred to as “the unchurched” – **94%** said they would go to church **if invited** and if the person inviting them would either meet them or take them so they didn’t have to go into a strange place alone. Most of us can understand this. Last summer I was curious about a contemporary service at St. Raphael’s Catholic Church that draws hundreds of teenagers. But I wasn’t comfortable going into a strange church of a different denomination by myself. No one said to me, “Come and see,” but I approached my neighbor who attends St. Raphael’s and asked about this service. She took me, driving me, sitting with me, and helping to guide me through the service. So it’s not surprising that these 94% of the unchurched said they would attend church if someone invited them and met them.

BUT, what’s truly surprising, is that of these 94%, only **14%** reported that they’d ever been invited. Now that says a lot more about we who claim to be disciples of Jesus than it does about the “unchurched.”

The implications are clear. How important that word-of-mouth personal invitation is! Yet one church historian has said that the average church member actually invites someone else to church only once every 28 years. I don’t doubt that there are good reasons for this very sad statistic.

Why Do We Find It So Difficult?

The Alban Institute has reported: *“the majority of members in most mainline Protestant churches are very timid about inviting people to church. Not only are they timid, some hold deep convictions that it is wrong to violate another person’s integrity by trying to push your religion off on them. They don’t feel it is appropriate to mention their church involvement to any of their friends.”*

I suspect many of us feel this discomfort. Indeed, some of us have had very negative, personal experiences where we felt trapped by someone who tried to coerce us into some religious belief through guilt or fear. And yes, we’ve probably all met people who understand evangelism to mean button-holing others with confrontation, inquiring “Are you saved?” Some believe evangelism is passing out religious tracts on street corners or going door to door like the Mormons or Jehovah Witnesses. Such experiences can leave some of us with a strong distaste for evangelism by word of mouth and a commitment not to do to someone else what has been done to us! Yet, the message of the gospel today is clear: both John the Baptist and Andrew and Philip use words to proclaim Jesus to their world: but their evangelistic word is very simple: *Come and see. Come find out for yourself.*

Two Simple Guidelines for Effective Evangelism

If you’re one who finds “witnessing” uncomfortable, then take note of how evangelism actually occurs in today’s gospel. First, remember that we are but God’s messenger in extending an invitation to *come and see* – the Kingdom of God needs no pushing and God’s Holy Spirit is the agent of conversion, not us. Second, be willing to share your own experience of Christ with others. That’s all John the Baptist did; that’s all Andrew did after his own encounter with Jesus. Andrew found his brother Peter and told him, “We have found the Messiah.” Andrew didn’t engage in any courtroom maneuvers to convince Peter he’s right; he didn’t indulge in any great theological reflection or analysis; he certainly didn’t resort to a high-powered sales pitch. He simply shares his own experience.

We Christians need to realize that other people are much more hungry to hear the good news than we are sometimes ready to share that good news.

There is indeed power in words – even simple words. We need to remember that the very words we utter when we invite someone else to come and see may be the impetus that leads to transformation and salvation. Every person with whom we come into contact deserves to receive the invitation: “Come and see.” As St. Paul observes, *"How are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?"* (Rom 10:14b).