

Trinity United Church of Christ
Second Sunday after Epiphany
January 15, 2012
The Rev. George Heberling

I Samuel 3: 1-20
Psalm 139: 1-6, 13-18
I Corinthians 6: 12-20
John 1: 43-51

We live in an age when it seems that time and distance have diminished to a fraction of what they were even twenty years ago. We have information and news available to us instantaneously. Through cable and satellite television we have access to and satellite television we have access to the latest breaking stories of events around the world even as they occur. Cell phones, iphones, and smart phones are glued to people's hips. The internet links us in a network which flows between and among people in ways unthought of even ten years ago. Satellites beam signals from one part of the world to another in milliseconds.

All of this seems overwhelming. And at the same time we are being told that we are just on the edge of this new age of information and technology. What is to come in the next few years is beyond the average person's imagination. We live in an incredible time. It is a bit frightening in a sense, because those who are unprepared or unwilling to adapt will be left farther behind. It is a bit exciting in the sense that those who are adventurous and willing to take risks have so many new opportunities to pursue.

But, in spite of the fact that we live in the midst of this information age, there are still items of information that technology cannot provide for us. Even though we could go into our computer or iPhone and find a restaurant in which to have lunch, we would probably be more likely to ask a friend where we could find a good restaurant to eat. You are not likely to determine where to have your car repaired by listening to radio or watching television. To find a doctor with whom you are comfortable, you are probably not likely to close your eyes and point to a name in the yellow pages. Rather, for these and other basic necessities, you are going to talk to people you trust for their ideas and their opinions. It is a one-to-one, face-to-face, kind of thing. You want a referral. If someone comes to you, asking for your opinion, you will be likely to give your opinion, based on your own personal experience.

So it is with faith as well; faith is a unique form of referral. One person invites another. A friend meets someone whom they can help or who can help them and eventually someone is brought to the source of help for both of them – Jesus Christ. Faith travels from person to person. Without one person sharing their faith with another, the source of God's power fails to flow through us to the people who need it. When we fail to share what has sustained and supported us in our lives, those waiting to hear remain in waiting. When we hold

back from extending an invitation, we deny another the opportunity to experience the trust and the confidence we have gained through Christ. Faith is not a secret to be kept, but a referral to be given.

Such is the case in this morning's Gospel. Early in his ministry according to John, Jesus left the southern region of Judea and went north to Galilee. There, in an unnamed village, he found and called Philip to follow him. We don't know how many other people Jesus had met along the way and invited to follow him – perhaps hundreds of them, but what we do know is that Philip responded and he could not keep this amazing and joyous event to himself. So Philip went and found his friend, Nathaneal. Philip told him that he believed that he had discovered the long promised and awaited Messiah in this man, Jesus, the man from Nazareth. Now Nathaneal responded with sarcasm and skepticism. Nathaneal, interested in and anxious for the coming of the Messiah, knew that the one to come was never foretold to be from Nazareth. That town was unimportant and minor; Nazareth was not the kind of place that anything good would come out of. So he ridiculed Philip.

But Philip was wise. He did not argue with his friend. He simply said, "Come and see." Here is an important fact to remember in sharing out faith. Not very many people have ever been argued into Christianity. Often our arguments do more harm than good. The moment you start debating or arguing the merit and worth of Christian faith, you have put the other person on the defensive. The only way to convince a person of the worth of following Christ is to show that person how Jesus governs your life. Not by arguing or by preaching or even by teaching are people won to Christ. Others respond on the basis of how your life is presented to them and how Christ is reflected in what you are and what you do. It is the simple way Christ lives in you that affects people's hearts and ideas. The best argument is not by debate, but simply saying, like Philip, "Come and see."

So, Nathaneal came. And Jesus could see into his heart. Jesus said, "Here is a real Israelite; there is nothing false in him." It was a real compliment that Jesus paid to him, an honor that Jesus would so address Nathaneal. Nathaneal was astonished and surprised that this man could possibly see through him in so short a time. Jesus, the keen observer and sensitive person that he was, had already seen Nathaneal under the fig tree. Now that means nothing to us, and so it sounds like nonsense. For the Jews the fig tree always stood for peace. The idea of peace was when a man could be undisturbed under his own vine and fig tree. The fig tree symbolized the place where a faithful Jew could go to sit and meditate and pray. Perhaps Jesus observed Nathaneal doing just that and assumed that Philip, who was just asked to be a disciple, had excitedly run over to Nathaneal to tell him of Jesus, the promised Messiah. No doubt, Nathaneal, as did every faithful follower of God, was praying for the day when God's Messiah would come. He knew God's promises.

Jesus' penetration into Nathaneal's thoughts must have surprised and thrilled Nathaneal. Finally Nathaneal had discovered for himself a person, namely Jesus, who understood his hopes, his dreams, his prayers. Here was the answer to Nathaneal's long sought desires, one who could help him discover the way to God. And Nathaneal responded in faith, "Teacher. (For Jesus had already taught him). You are the Son of God. You are the King of Israel."

We can learn from Jesus' approach that every person we meet is looking to be recognized as having worth and value. Jesus was concerned enough about Nathaneal to take the time to be sensitive to his needs, to let Nathaneal know that he was important and of value, to be treated with dignity. Jesus first encounter with Nathaneal, the skeptic and cynic, was to pay him a compliment, a genuine honor. And our encounter with all people should be similar. If we want another person to know the joy of Christ, we must also be sensitive to that person's needs, not be put off by skepticism, or respond defensively to initial ridicule. That is a trap. To become uptight around those who lack faith, to be insensitive to those who have little interest in Christ, to turn off those who are skeptical. But we must overcome our insecurity. We have to be well-rooted in our faith to be confident and secure enough to avoid the temptation to shut ourselves off from the very people who need our witness the most. The moment we have turned our backs to those who are searching or those who ridicule the faith, we have set a poor example. By our failure we have set them even more negatively against Christ and the church.

We remember that, however much a person may deny it or refuse to acknowledge it, every person is looking for something to believe in larger than self. A person needs to find that or else wander aimlessly, without purpose through life. And ends up frustrated. Our faith tells us that our purpose is to give direction to others, to point to a more meaningful relationship with God and with each other. Every encounter for us, however momentary it is, becomes the opportunity to sensitively and sensibly point others to the way of God. What an incredible thought it is that we can make a difference in another person's life.

Where there is confusion, we can offer clarity; where there is despair, we can offer hope; where there is anger, we can offer healing and calm; where there is frustration, we can offer direction. That is the possibility when we share one on one with those whom we encounter along the way. It is the gift that we can give – to share our faith. God's referral service. May we always seek to be so with those we meet in the coming days.