

And They Told Two Friends  
John 1:35-51  
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I have a confession to make. I've steered you wrong for years, led you down a false path. Since at least 2008, I've been feeding you a lie. It was an honest mistake at first, but I can't keep it a secret any longer. I've had an epiphany and I have to come clean. You see, for a long time, I've repeated an untruth about Christian evangelism. Here is the evidence of my heresy: watch

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oCjmDI4AJlk>

Yes, for years I have been telling you that it was a television commercial for Suave shampoo that burned the phrase, "And they told two friends" into our collective consciousness. But in fact, it was Faberge. I am so sorry. Maybe you can find it in your hearts to forgive me if I tell you that the Suave commercial from the same era was actually pretty catchy too: "Suave does what theirs does, for a lot less." But no matter how catchy the Suave ad was, it probably didn't sell more shampoo unless it too received the same "she told two friends" treatment from its customers. You see, the Faberge ad was just confirming what we already know is true: that word of mouth advertising is simply the best kind.

Maybe you already know this, but research has shown that 90% of regular church attenders started going to their church not because they saw a catchy advertisement, but because someone they knew, a family member or a friend,

personally invited them. Ninety percent. Let that soak in for a minute. Neither famous actors, pretty faces, special effects, nor catchy slogans are what get people to church. YOU get them to church. You and your story. You and your witness. You and your experience with God. You and the sense of community you express. You and the effect on your children. You and your joy. This is what “sells” church. This is how it worked in the beginning. This is how it still works today. We can spend our entire budget on advertising, but it won’t move the needle as much as each one of you telling two friends about why ECF is the place they will meet God every week.

That’s what Andrew did. That’s what Philip did. Andrew was even a member of another church, John the Baptist’s church, so to speak. He was a follower of John who listened carefully to what his pastor told him. Actually, it all began with John, didn’t it? At the beginning of our story tonight, John is the one who tells Andrew and the other disciple of John that Jesus has come: “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” He doesn’t try to keep them for himself, to make his own flock bigger. He gives them away, practically sends them away. John does his part; he tells two friends.

And what happened? Those two disciples went and had their own firsthand experience with the Lamb of God. And that led them to share the experience. And so Andrew goes and finds his brother Simon, and invites him to come and see for himself. “We have found the Messiah,” he says. And then Simon too goes off and

meets Jesus and begins his own story that he will tell again and again. And it happens again with Philip, who meets Jesus, discovers he is the one “about whom Moses and the prophets wrote,” and invites his friend Nathanael. And on and on it went, each person encountering Jesus in their own way, and inviting others to do the same thing. They told two friends and they told two friends and so on.

There are a couple of things I’d like to say about this method in our own time. The first is that it is not a method for church growth, at least not primarily. Jesus wasn’t interested in church growth. He was interested in the growth of the kingdom. He was interested in people living the way God had designed for us to live together. Elsewhere in the Gospels when the disciples complain that people are doing miraculous things in Jesus’ name, even though they are not his disciples, he says, “let them be.” John shows the way when he lets his own followers follow Jesus. The point isn’t to get bigger to “prove” Jesus is the way. The point isn’t to be able to claim victory on the basis of numbers or popularity. The point isn’t even to keep the church going. The point is that people may see those greater things, the hope rather than the despair, the joy rather than the sorrow, the life rather than the death, those greater things like “heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man” -- all those things that show us that God still loves and cares about this world and everything in it.

It may not be about church growth, but the reason we invite people to church, rather than just into a vague, if personal, relationship with Jesus is that their best

chance to witness those angels running up and down, and all the rest of the greater things, is in the body of Christ, the church. Jesus may not have started a church, but he created a community of those first disciples in which they saw marvelous things, from which they went forth to invite, and to which they returned to nurture and challenge those who decided to climb on board. When Jesus says, “Follow me,” he means come and join up with all those in search of the greater things. Jesus doesn’t demand allegiance to an organization, but he expects it to happen since God has always been found in the midst of not just individuals but the people. God didn’t appear to Abraham just to give him a plot of land to feed his livestock. He led him to Canaan to provide a place for everyone. God didn’t lead only Moses out of exile, or only Joshua across the River Jordan, but to lead a whole people to safety. God didn’t provide Ten Commandments for how to get God to do each person’s private bidding, but to show them how to live together, that everyone’s needs might be met. In each of these episodes of our history, those greater things were found not internally and privately, but in the common life of all who were assembled. It is to that common life that we invite people still today.

The other thing I want to say about inviting friends is that I recognize that some of you face some challenges. Many of your friends may already be Christians, and it’s not our style to try to raid other churches. Your circle of friends here is probably more limited here than it might be back home, wherever that might be. You may have already invited all your English-speaking friends in years past, and

your Spanish-speaking friends are just kind of out of luck with the way we do things now. For those of you who may find yourself in that spot, you'll have a different job for October 5. Your job will be to do your best to make sure that those new people who do come see the greater things in you, in us. Your job will be to help them experience God's hospitality and God's generosity, and God's compassion, and God's justice. I'm not saying this to give you a way out of inviting friends, but to make sure those people who do come don't go away with the idea that we just want them here to fill our seats, or our offering baskets, but that we want them to experience God in Jesus Christ as fully as if it was he himself who had invited them, or called out to them to "follow me." In the most practical terms, this will mean that you make a special effort to greet and to smile and to wear a nametag and to prepare your children or grandchildren to do the same. It will mean that you go beyond pleasantries to meaningful conversations about life and faith. Do you think Andrew and Philip spent those first afternoons with Jesus talking about the weather or about the signs of the times? They didn't recognize Jesus as the Messiah because he knew where to get the best olives in town, but because he knew how to describe the olive trees in the Kingdom of God. Think of the time our visitors spend here as the time Andrew and Philip spent with Jesus, as the chance to help them see some of life's truly greater things.

Let me suggest that one way to prepare for Invite-A-Friend Sunday is to do a little review of your life and make note of where and where and with whom you

have seen the greater things, and not just in spectacular terms, but in everyday terms, in ways that you feel comfortable talking about and others can connect with. Like when someone sat with you as you waited in the hospital, or when food unexpectedly arrived during a crisis, or when your child came home with a new understanding of God's generosity. These are the experiences that will help others see how God is at work here and how they may find their hurts and hopes addressed in a divine way.

For those of you who do still have someone to invite, and I think it really is almost all of us, I want to ask you to think about what it must have meant for Simon and Nathanael to have been invited to visit Jesus. These were the two whom Andrew and Philip, not Jesus, reached out to. It's true that Nathanael doesn't make any further appearances in the Gospels, but we have no reason to believe that he suddenly stopped believing that Jesus was the "Son of God" and "King of Israel" as he proclaims. And we know what happened to Simon, who became Cephas/Peter. Do you think they weren't grateful to those who had invited them? In a very real way, they had a life changing experience because someone else cared enough to pass on the good news. You see, evangelism is as simple as that: passing on the good news of your life. You share recipes and movie recommendations and car mechanics, all their own kind of good news, and you share them through your word of mouth. How much more important than all of that good news is the good news that there is real hope in the world, and the opportunity to be truly known and

loved, and to learn what life is all about, all through this Jesus guy who simply says, “Follow me.” The thing is that he isn’t here to say it these days. Those words are ours to say now. But we need to actually say them and not expect people to read them on a billboard or a website and think they really are a life-changing invitation. *You* are as much the message as the messenger.

I can’t guarantee that your invitees will see the spectacle Jesus describes, but I can guarantee that if we are faithful to the example of Andrew and Philip, they will see a reflection of that same Jesus in the lives of the people they encounter here. And then they’ll tell two friends, and they’ll tell two friends. And that’s really the way it works. Amen.