

“Within the Sound of Your Voice”
John 1:29-42
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There is something to be said about gossip, buzz, chisme, the word on the street. The Hollywood handlers of Oscar contenders are trying to generate, spin, and do damage control on, the publicity of the potential nominees. Governments from Caracas to Washington do their best to coerce their media into accepting their version of events in the wars on poverty or terror or the latest economic data. Pat Robertson, Benny Hinn, Bishop John Shelby Spong and a host of other preachers try to present their brand of Christianity as the only one worth buying. Everybody and their brother is trying to influence what you see, know, and ultimately buy or give your loyalty to. Everybody and their brother has a point of view they want you to share. But it starts with everybody recruiting their brother.

In the Gospel of John, that “everybody” is Andrew and he literally started with his brother. After spending the day with Jesus, to whom John has alerted him saying, “Look, here is the Lamb of God,” Andrew finds his brother Simon, gives him the hard sell, and even takes him over to meet this guy he has learned is the Messiah. The rest is history. This same Simon becomes the Apostle Peter, a leader of the early church, the predecessor to the Pope, and an example of impulsive faith through the ages. And it all started with word of mouth.

They say word of mouth is the best advertising. It is certainly priceless. You can put a dollar figure on billboards, website banners, t-shirts, and airplane skywriting, but true word of mouth, a genuine thumbs up or thumbs down from a trusted source, cannot be bought or sold. Sure, there are legendary stories of creative marketing strategies and clever, award-winning TV commercials, but even the slightest shrug or hesitation from a friend or family member can make you decide not to see that new movie. This is one place where the messenger is often as important as the message. In the first century, an age without mass media, without even mass literacy, what other way could the Gospel spread than good, old-fashioned word of mouth? The old TV commercials for Suave shampoo understood the power of this method. You tell two friends and they'll tell two friends, and they'll tell two friends and pretty soon the whole world knows. Hey, it worked for John the Baptist. He told two friends, one of whom was Andrew, and Andrew told Simon, and, we may presume, others. And of course, Peter did his share of telling.

My hunch is that the same strategy brought many of you here for the first time. Someone you knew and trusted had good things to say about this church and its ministry, and maybe even specifically invited you and accompanied you. In national surveys of church members about why they first came to their church, the overwhelming reason was that someone had personally invited them. The days are gone when denominational loyalty is the reason why a person chooses a particular

church. Far more compelling now, and indeed essential now, is good, old-fashioned word of mouth. Let me explain why.

John the Baptist, Andrew, his brother Simon, Philip and Nathanael who also meet Jesus in the first chapter of the Gospel of John, and of course, Jesus himself, were all Jews. They all came from that family of chosen people, living in Palestine, occupied by the Romans, who were not like them. They all knew the history of a promised Messiah, they all had a common vocabulary and common expectations. They all spoke the same religious language, so to speak. In such a context, the word of mouth needed might as well have been a code that only a select few knew, or even needed to know. And that was OK. They would have wanted to keep a low profile from the Romans who might not take kindly to the talk of revolution which would accompany buzz about a Messiah. And so, when Andrew says to Simon, “We have found the Messiah,” his brother knew exactly what he was talking about, perhaps not fully understanding what Jesus as Messiah would really mean, but understanding at least that the Messiah’s coming meant something profound. Among the Gentiles, those Romans and other non-Jews, the same statement, “We have found the Messiah,” would have been met with a shrug, since the idea of Messiah did not carry the same currency among them that it did among the Jews.

All this is to say that the first century denominational loyalty that existed among Andrew and all rest of his Jewish comrades made bringing his brother to Jesus as easy as opening the door. Far more challenging was the later task of the

Apostle Paul whose mission it was to bring to Christ those whose social and religious contexts were so much different than that of Judaism that word of mouth was an exercise in patience, as much as it was an exercise in evangelism. It is a situation not that different than today. You see, if you look at current national surveys of religious attitudes, you'll find a lot of data that indicates a high level of belief in God, or at least a higher power, but far less, and often no, participation in so-called "organized religion." For more than four decades now in most of the Northern hemisphere, fewer and fewer people have been coming to churches of all kinds. The result is a vocabulary shared by fewer and fewer people. The number of people today you can be assured will understand what you mean when you quote from one of the great hymns of the church, "God in three persons, blessed Trinity," is dropping day by day. In much the same way the Romans would have received Andrew's statement, these days you are likely to get a bewildered look by saying to those who are not already in church, "Jesus is my Savior," since whether they really need one or not, most people don't think they need to be saved from anything, so lost from our cultural vocabulary is a notion of sin as something which needs a solution. And so the kind of word of mouth that we use must change. The word of mouth of simple invitation, of coded vocabulary, of denominational loyalty, is in need of some overhaul in a post-modern world full of people who don't even know what the Protestant Church is protesting.

Conveniently, this same passage offers us some insight into this issue in the person of John the Baptist, who offers some clues about the ways in which our word of mouth might find its way into the hearts of those who need to hear it. John was not the Messiah, but he was a man with a compelling message about God. He had followers, maybe even groupies. Today's passage describes Andrew and another unnamed man as his disciples. At one level, he has a vested interest in keeping his disciples his. His ministry was godly and he was doing good work. But he wasn't perfect and so even though he had been announcing that Jesus was coming, it must have been at least a little tempting for him to ignore Jesus walking by, to hold onto what influence he had over his followers. But in a moment of personal sacrifice, he points out Jesus, identifies him as the Lamb of God, and off go his disciples to learn more about Jesus, never to return again. What John teaches us is that we must be willing to put aside our personal agendas, our personal power, maybe even our livelihoods, for the sake of pointing people in the right direction. Maybe it means risking relationships with those we care about by engaging them in a serious conversation about our faith and who Jesus Christ is for us. Maybe it means being willing to learn a new vocabulary, or sing a new style of music, or sit in a new pew, or side of the church, so that we may authentically reach those who need to be reached. Maybe it even means suggesting that people go to a church other than our own if, in so doing, they can experience Christ more deeply.

But prior even to pointing out the divine, John exhibits for us an openness to experience the divine. In contrast to the stories in Matthew and Luke, in the Gospel of John, there is no understanding of John the Baptist and Jesus being cousins. Twice, in just these few verses, John the Baptist declares that “I myself did not know him!” And yet, somehow, he is able to recognize Jesus and point him out to others. John’s is truly a case of “If you believe it, you’ll see it!” John was in tune with, he was aware of, the divine passing by him. Among the crowds of people who must have passed by him, he is able to pick out the one who is full of grace and truth, the divine one who pitched his tent and dwelt among us. Word of mouth may be powerful, but it doesn’t mean a thing if you don’t have any word to pass on. Your own personal experience recognizing God in your midst is the most powerful testimony you have. Your own story of your radical, day by day encounters with Jesus Christ, shared in your own words, is the most convincing story you’ll ever tell. But if we close ourselves off to the grace that is all around us, we’ll miss it and we’ll have nothing to say.

Consider finally the way John wears his passion for Christ on his sleeve. The Gospel writer is keen for us to know that John was very excited that Jesus was made his presence known. “Look, here is the Lamb of God,” John exclaimed. John exclaimed it! He didn’t just say it. He didn’t just mention it in passing. He didn’t just declare it. He exclaimed it. If we are to communicate to people who need Jesus Christ, we need to do it with passion, with conviction, with verve, with drama.

Who's going to believe half-hearted word of mouth? Who's going to want to follow someone we only seem lukewarm about following ourselves? Now, I know some of you out there are going, "Uh, we're not really a very excitable people," and you may be right, you're may not be, but I know that everyone is capable of showing *some* excitement. Believe me, those who know and trust us know when we are excited even if it is just a little crack in our uptight armor. And you know, it wouldn't hurt you to show a little emotion once in a while for the Lord and Savior of the world.

Friends, the gospel is shared, and people are introduced to Jesus Christ, and lives are changed, when we care enough for others that we are willing to risk something of themselves, when we are willing to speak up, when we point out with passion and conviction that which is utterly obvious to us but to which others are utterly oblivious -- the divine in their midst. Within the sound of your voice are people who need to meet Jesus Christ. Like John the Baptist, presumeably, you are able to recognize Christ, recognize the divine, recognize grace in your midst. And then all you have to do, like John, is to offer, with a little excitement in your voice, to those with whom you are in conversation, your 21st century equivalent of "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" And then they'll tell two friends, and they'll tell two friends, and then the church of Jesus Christ, the body of Jesus Christ, will be alive and well for generations to come. Amen.