

Is spreading the good news about Jesus Christ as easy as it looks in the first chapter of John? Within seventeen verses we watch five conversions. John the Baptist points to Jesus, and two of his disciples immediately switch loyalty to the Lamb of God. One of these disciples tells his brother, Simon, to check out the stranger from Nazareth. Immediately, Jesus gives Simon a new name and a new identity, "From now on, you are 'Cephas,'" which means "the rock." Nathaniel is the doubter among the new converts, but Jesus quickly cures that with a miracle of omniscience. "I saw you sitting under the fig tree," Jesus says, even though he was miles away. So Nathaniel, awed by Jesus, professes faith, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God, the King of Israel." Just get people close to Jesus, the gospel suggests, and they will believe in him and receive life in his name, for he is the connecting point between heaven and earth.

Therein lies the problem for us 21st century disciples. Jesus is not present in the same way he was back when Herod ruled Judea. The first followers could point potential believers directly to the source. There Jesus was in the flesh and blood. People could be led by the hand to his side, hear the words tumble right out of his mouth, gaze directly into his searching eyes, absorb his blessing on their foreheads. Jesus could be taken in through the senses. But that was then; this is now. Those who might attach to

him must look at us to see and hear him. And the lives we live, as we all know, are not always the most convincing testimony to the power and nature of Christ.

Of course, if Jesus appeared in the flesh right now, still not everyone would believe in him. Not everyone believed in him the first time he came around. In fact, as we shall see in chapters and sermons to come, some people hated Jesus. I'm simply saying we don't have the advantage of pointing to a visible person outside of ourselves and saying to those who might believe, "See what you think of him for yourself."

Another hurdle in the way of spreading the good news of Jesus is the history we share. That history made you squirm a little when I spoke of spreading the good news. Is the minister talking about evangelism? That is what I'm talking about, though I stayed away from the word as long as I could, nearly unredeemable as it is. Don't the Mormons and the Jehovah's Witnesses call what they do 'evangelism'? Lisa a former member of this church, now a member of a congregation outside of Nashville, heard a knock at her door. A man stood there, told her he was speaking on behalf of his church, and asked if she might be interested in coming to worship. Lisa replied, "I already belong to a church." Which one, he wanted to know. "First Presbyterian," she said. He was not deterred. "But have you accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and

Savior?" He was beginning to get under Lisa's skin. "Of course, I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. It's a requirement, you know, if you want to belong to a church." He continued unaffected, "Our church is a Bible believing church." Well, enough was enough. Lisa said, "I'm an elder where I attend, and my church is just fine." Have you ever run across somebody who started talking about Jesus, but wasn't interested in a conversation, who kept poking and poking, trying to find some weak link in you to exploit so he could break you down and rebuild you in his image? And he probably called what he was doing 'evangelism.' No wonder we can't mention the name of Jesus among friends or strangers without raising their defenses.

So, two obstacles are in the way as we try to point others toward Jesus Christ: we're pointing to someone who isn't physically with us, and those who have sought to share Christ with others sometimes have done more harm than good.

And yet, not all is lost. In spite of the obstacles, we can do the work to which we are called, which is to serve as a link between others and the living Christ. Not necessarily by knocking on doors at random, but simply by inviting others to our church community. To our great advantage, though Jesus is absent in the body, he still makes himself present in the worship and fellowship of the church. Christ is, in fact, present in many places, any place

he wishes to be. But he is particularly available through his Spirit in the community that bears his name. Sometimes he comes to us in the verse of a hymn, quiet and still, or ringing the rafters. Other times, he comes in the Bible stories told in Sunday School. If you watch, you can see him in the arm that wraps around a grieving mother or in the relationship between a mentor and confirmand. Christ chooses to speak through the words that come from the pulpit, from the bread broken at table, and the water poured at this font. Our feeble lives are not the only witness to Christ. The Spirit also bears witness to Christ in and through us so that we are never working alone. And as best we can tell, the Spirit does a pretty good job of stirring up faith in Jesus. After all, how did we come to believe in him? Wasn't there a community somewhere through whom Jesus became real to us? So, take heart. The Spirit of Christ is here and capable of generating faith in us and others.

Inviting others into the life of the church is much easier if we start with those who already know and trust us. 4 out of 5 new followers in the first chapter of John are brought to Christ by people they know. John the Baptist is the bridge to Jesus for two of his disciples. Andrew brings his brother Simon Peter to Jesus. Philip tells his friend Nathaniel that he and two other guys from Nathaniel's hometown have found the Messiah. These future

disciples are willing to consider Jesus because people they know and trust are offering the invitation.

When we take up the call to share Jesus Christ, we begin within our existing web of relationships. We say, "Come and see," within the circle of our human contacts. We invite those new people that we met at work who have just moved into town; the daughter-in-law who likes to drink coffee at our kitchen table on Monday mornings; the new neighbors after we have made it clear that we already care about them, whether they come to church or not; the unchurched professional who sits beside us at the not-for-profit board meeting; the guys and gals we're getting to know because we work out at the Y at the same time. Nearly all of us have more connections to unchurched or new-to-town people than we think. Perhaps persons within your web of relationships are already coming to mind. They will continue to come to mind if you ask for God's help to see them throughout the course of your day. With their best interest at heart, knowing that you will still care for them, even if they decline the invitation, do you think you might say to some of your contacts, "Come and see. Come with me to my community of faith." Invite them, and Jesus Christ might just reveal himself to them.

I hope that knowing we don't have to start with complete strangers helps some. But inviting people to church may still be a

big step for us. None of us want to push or offend. We also don't want to stir up a bunch of questions we can't answer. What if we invite someone, and they ask me what the church believes? Or, what if they want to know if we're this kind of Presbyterian or that kind of Presbyterian or just plain old Presbyterians? The short answer is this: if someone asks a question you can't answer, tell them you don't know, but you'll help them find out. The long answer is to be prepared to share a few things you like about your church if folks want to know more.

What do you appreciate about this congregation? Can you name four or five gifts that matter to you? Carry these around with you in case someone might want to know more about who we are. I'll give you a few on my list: strong lay leaders who take on tasks and get them done beautifully; the free space we have to admit our doubts and struggles; great generosity toward those in need; the number of people involved in service ministries; the sense of tradition that tells us we come from somewhere and have somewhere to go; the care we show when people are sick or troubled. I could go on. What would be on your list? It doesn't have to be just like mine. You may include your Sunday School class, the style of worship, or that elders can be young or old, male or female. Lists will vary. Having one, though, will make talking

about our church easier. What strengths and gifts could you list and share when the time is right?

We don't have to convince anyone that our church is perfect. That's not the point. We could come up, too, with a list of things we would like to see improve. But this I believe, along with another Presbyterian minister, Graham Standish. The more we focus on the special gifts of our congregation, the more gratitude we have for its life. And the more grateful we are for this particular congregation, the more eager we will be to share it with others. So again, my encouragement to make that list of things about this community that you appreciate, and be ready to share it.

So far, we've underlined the need to invite others into our fellowship where they might meet Christ. We haven't said much about our own personal faith in Jesus. But now we have to. Since we bear the name of Christ, being able to speak about his importance to us is necessary. The key is learning to speak of him in ways that are authentic to us. You don't have to speak of Jesus like the guy who knocked on Lisa's door, or like the woman at the service club whose faith is too saccharine for you. Speak of Jesus in your own way after you have considered what he means to you. These questions will help.

What draws you to Jesus Christ? In my case, I'm amazed by the way he is both humble and relentless, how he loves so many

and is not afraid to face anyone. I love the way he lived the very things he taught, like loving your enemies and praying for those who treat you badly. What do you believe about Jesus? I believe that he loves me intensely, sometimes more intensely than I can suffer; that he faced off against the powers of sin and death, and through his resurrection overcame them for us; that through him nothing can separate us from God's love, and that his way of life is life indeed. What questions would you ask Jesus? I would ask Jesus what he thinks of other faith traditions and our relationship to them. I would ask him why it's so tough sometimes to know the right thing to do.

When we map out our relationship with Jesus, then we have plenty to talk about, and we don't have to clean it up for anybody. If we struggle to believe this about him, or if we stumble on some of his teaching, we can be honest about that, too. The main thing is to be able to talk about who Jesus is to us, what we believe about him, how he stretches us and how he comforts us in ways that match our experience.

Martha Grace Reese wasn't always a follower of Jesus. She was a smart person, well accomplished, but not someone schooled in the faith. She met someone in graduate school who became a friend. Martha began to talk to her friend about the lack of purpose she felt, like she was missing something. Her friend,

someone who followed Jesus, listened to Martha and loved her.

And she began to share her own faith, her real faith, still incomplete and still growing. She marked passages from the gospel of John for Martha to read. The Spirit kept on working from there, and Martha, too, came to believe. Eventually, she became a minister, who specializes in reaching people with the good news of Jesus Christ. Sometimes, I think, I've missed chances to be a link like Martha's friend. I don't want to miss any more chances. And I want to keep inviting, even though some have not and will not respond to the invitation.

Come and see. Can we offer the invitation to others? With kindness and concern. Because we care. Because we have something worth sharing in our hearts and within this community. Come and see not us, but Jesus Christ.