

FOCUS: The Good News is we are called to proclaim the Good News. (First in a two-part series)

In the Name of the Father and of the +Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Philip was not a Lutheran. He couldn't have been a Lutheran because he brought not one, but three men whom we know of to meet Jesus during the three short years of Jesus' ministry. If Philip were a Lutheran, it would have taken him 100 years to invite four people to meet Jesus, because the average Lutheran invites one person to church every twenty-five years.

Philip brought Nathanael to meet Jesus because Philip was convinced he, and some others, had found the Anointed One of whom Moses and the prophets spoke. Philip took a risk in inviting Nathanael to meet Jesus. First, it was a risk because Philip was talking about the King of the Jews, the Promised One of God. That was risky business, because the rulers of the Israelites weren't too happy with the idea of folks claiming to be the Messiah, let alone those who appeared to be challenging the person on the throne. Philip's first risk could have cost him his life.

Philip's second risk was in inviting his dear friend, Nathanael, to come with him to meet this man called Jesus. It was a risk for Philip because Nathanael could have told him "No, I don't want to go," and in the process also told Philip not to bother him again. Nathanael might have even told Philip to never speak to him again if Philip was going to be involved with this Jesus character. If Nathanael had acted in this way, I'm sure it would have been a great blow to Philip, and perhaps it would have been enough for him to turn away from Jesus. We'll never know.

While we Christians in America don't face the first risk, we certainly face the second. If we lived in a country without the freedoms we enjoy here—perhaps Saudi Arabia or Iraq or Egypt—we could, and probably would, face a sentence of death or lengthy imprisonment for proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah. There are places around the globe—and not just in Islamic countries—where the open practice of the Christian faith is not permitted. In these places, the slightest suspicion of Christian faith can result in immediate arrest and punishment. To talk to a neighbor, friend, or total stranger about Jesus would be out of the question.

Saturday, at our synod's annual Together in Mission¹ event, our presiding bishop, Mark Hanson, was the opening worship preacher and keynote speaker. In his keynote address, Bishop Hanson asked this question of the assembly, "If you were accused of being a follower of Jesus, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" He asked this question of those of us in attendance as he talked about the various marks of a dynamic church, noting that one of those marks was that a dynamic church was a *witnessing* church.

To be witnesses of the grace of God that comes to us through Jesus Christ is to share with others the truth about what God is up to in our lives. We are not sent out alone to be witnesses, either. When we were baptized, we were filled with the Holy Spirit, and the

¹ *Together in Mission* is an annual gathering of the Metropolitan Washington DC Synod to share experiences, best practices, tips, and information regarding mission development, growth, and witness. Held January 18, 2003, at Bethany Lutheran Church, Forestville, MD.

Holy Spirit is with us at all times and in all places, to support and strengthen us in our witnessing of the Good News. This is what it means to be a *witnessing* church—to share with others how God is making Himself known in our personal lives.

For Philip, his witness to Nathanael was pretty straightforward. Philip simply told Nathanael what Philip and the others believe about Jesus—that Jesus is the one for whom they have waited. Now, Nathanael wasn't that impressed with what Philip told him. After all, Nazareth was a backwater little village from which no one and no thing of any importance had ever come. Philip was undaunted, and simply told Nathanael, "Come and see."

Note that Philip didn't offer Nathanael a long theological discourse on the Son of Man, nor did Philip delve into the doctrinal differences between John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth. Philip simply invited Nathanael to "come and see" for himself. Philip didn't worry that he was lacking any formal theological training or background. He simply wanted Nathanael to come and see who Jesus was and what Jesus had to say.

Here, Philip demonstrates for us another of the marks of a dynamic church—to be an *inviting* church. Note that Philip's invitation is not to someone who is already a part of the community, but to someone who is *not* a part of the group. It's one thing to be nice to someone who comes to church as a visitor. It's a whole other thing to invite someone who is not *in* church to come and see what is happening in the church community.

Bishop Hanson, in his keynote address, made a very strong statement about our need to be an *inviting* church. "This is a 'Come to Jesus meeting,' friends. The church *will not* stop its decline until the *leaders* of the church start inviting the unchurched." These are the words of our presiding bishop, dear sisters and brothers. We are not called to build up membership by transfer or, as some would say, by rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. No, we are *commanded* by our Lord Jesus Christ to make *disciples*, not members, by baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. It is, simply put, the vocation—the calling, the assignment, the task—of the baptized to be evangelists.

In the Great Commission, included in Matthew's account of the last words of the Risen Christ to the disciples and others assembled at the time of his ascension, we are given our instructions as evangelists—as those who proclaim the Good News. This is, indeed, an awesome responsibility. However, we do not enter this vocation of the baptized alone. Remember also the words of Christ that Luke records for us in the first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. In verse eight, we hear the Risen Christ tell the disciples, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."² We have the promise of Christ that we will not be alone in our witness to the world, but that we will receive the *power* of the Holy Spirit, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, we—you and I, just as our ancestors did—will be *witnesses* of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth.

² Acts 1:8 (NRSV)

In our baptism, God makes a covenant with us. As we hear in the opening words of our baptismal liturgy, we are born children of a fallen humanity, by “the waters of Baptism we are reborn children of God and inheritors of eternal life. By water and the Holy Spirit we are made members of the Church which is the body of Christ.”³ In our rite for affirmation or reaffirmation of faith, the pastor asks those making their affirmation, “You have made public profession of your faith. Do you intend to continue in the covenant God made with you in Holy Baptism: to live among God’s faithful people, to hear his Word and share in his supper, to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people, following the example of our Lord Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth?”

We are called to be God’s children. Like so many children, we are called to follow in the steps of our heavenly Father and participating in the “family business.” Our part in the “family business” is to be witnesses—the marketing and media team, if you will. Next Sunday, we’ll continue our look at our vocation as God’s baptized children. Thanks be to God.

³ *Lutheran Book of Worship*, “Holy Baptism”