

Making Disciples Who Make More Disciples

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I had to smile this week as I came across some cynical statements that I thought you might enjoy - most of which were new to me.

- If you think nobody cares about you, try missing a couple of payments.
- For every action, there is an equal and opposite criticism.
- He who hesitates is probably right.
- Bills travel through the mail at twice the speed of checks.
- 42.7 percent of all statistics are made up on the spot.
- Two wrongs are only the beginning.
- No good deed goes unpunished.

Now, I don't tend to think this way. I'm one of those people who see the glass half-full. But some people just have a different way of seeing things. This morning we read in the Gospel of John about a cynic – a cynic who became Jesus' disciple -- and who, in turn, went out to make more disciples.

Nathanael (the same guy as Bartholomew, as he is called in the other Gospel accounts) had a cynical streak. You heard the story. Jesus invited Philip to follow him. Philip, now a disciple, immediately goes out to make another disciple. He finds Nathanael and excitedly tells him he has found the Promised One – the one to whom the Old Testament points: Jesus from Nazareth.

Now, it seems that Nazareth had a reputation in those parts. Perhaps, being a small rural village, it wasn't highly regarded. Or perhaps there was a bit of a rivalry between Bethsaida (Philip's home town) and Nazareth. Either way, Nathanael wasn't impressed. "Nazareth! You gotta be kidding. What good can come from there?" It was a rather cynical response. But however cynical, Philip refused to be drawn in. He simply said, "Come and see."

Nathanael was skeptical about Jesus. But then Jesus found him, calling him a "true Israelite, in whom there is no deceit." Nathanael was caught off guard: "How do you know anything about me?" he asked. Well, Jesus had seen him under a fig tree, before Philip had talked to him. We have no idea what that means; we can only guess. But, whatever it was, Jesus' comment had real significance for Nathanael. And his next words are nothing short of amazing. "Teacher: you are the Son of God, the King of Israel!" What a turnabout! The skeptic is now a believer.

Then Jesus takes him a step further: "You think this is good? Just wait. You will see greater things than these." And he references Jacob's ladder, on which angels walked up and down from Heaven. (Hang onto that thought; we'll return to it later.)

So, what do we know of Nathanael/Bartholomew? Scripture tells us a few things:

- He was one of Jesus' disciples, part of his inner circle of friends.
- He went fishing with Peter after the Resurrection.

- He watched as Jesus ascended into Heaven, having heard Jesus’ last command: “Go and make disciples of all nations.”
- He was there on the day of Pentecost, witnessing the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit as 3000 people came to faith in Christ.

Church tradition tells us more: Nathanael was a missionary to both India and Armenia. Fourth century Church Fathers wrote of his witness in India. In Armenia – the first nation to adopt Christianity as its state religion – the Apostolic Church credits its beginnings to Bartholomew and another disciple, Jude Thaddeus. Nathanael, like all the apostles, was not only a disciple of Jesus, but went out to make other disciples.

Well, what can we take away from Nathanael’s story? Several things. First, as followers of Jesus, our job is simply **to invite** – to invite people to *come and see*. Philip, a brand-new disciple, told his friend about Jesus saying, “He is the One who was promised in Scripture!” When Nathanael responded skeptically, Philip would not be drawn into an argument. But neither would he be put off. When you are telling someone about Jesus, you may meet with some resistance. That’s ok. (It will not be the first or the last time!) Your job is not to prove or to persuade, but simply to invite. “Come and see.”

So often we think of evangelism as a rather uncomfortable, awkward conversation, where one imposes his beliefs on another, who really isn’t interested. How different evangelism looks if you imagine that your job is not to press others with questions like, “Have you accepted Jesus?” or “Do you know where you will spend eternity?” (Now, these are not bad questions. But perhaps you don’t want to start there.) Instead, imagine that evangelism is kind of like those newspaper notices of unclaimed inheritances. I mean, if you saw a neighbor’s name in the newspaper as an heir to unclaimed riches, wouldn’t you give him a call and let him know? That’s what real evangelism is! It’s sharing good news. As Martin Luther once said, evangelism is simply “one beggar telling another beggar where to find food.”

Philip tried neither to defend his position, nor to prove it, nor to persuade Nathanael to listen. Philip could have shared his own opinions. He could have said, “This Jesus knows a lot about the Bible.” Or he might have said, “He’s really cool. I like him.” When Nathanael expressed skepticism about “anything good coming out of Nazareth,” Philip might have listed some successful Nazarenes. But Philip did none of those things. Instead, he just said, *Come and see for yourself*. As a veteran salesman told a younger trainee, “You can lead a horse to water but you can’t make him drink. And that’s ok. Your job is not to make him drink. Your job is to make him thirsty.” So it is with making disciples. Just whet his thirst. Keep the invitation simple.

So that’s the first thing we can learn: our job is simply to invite. The second is this: **leave the persuasion to Jesus**. You see, an encounter with Jesus is always person-to-person. You don’t need to be the middle-man. Jesus had an impact on people, one way or the other. Think of it: when Nathanael encountered Jesus, he left a changed man. He turned around 180 degrees -- from skeptic to believer. Whenever people encounter Jesus, they are changed. And Jesus does the changing.

Jesus made an impact on everyone he met (one way or the other). Read through the Gospels and note the profound effect Jesus has when he meets people: the Canaanite woman, whose daughter Jesus cured; the blind man who received his sight when Jesus spit on some dirt and put the mud on his eyes; the Roman centurion whose faith was unique; the woman at the Pharisee's home who washed Jesus' feet with her tears and found forgiveness; Zacchaeus, the rich tax collector who gave away his wealth after sharing a meal with Jesus; the woman at the well who ran to tell her village about the man she believed to be the Messiah; the sick man at the Bethesda pool who had waited 38 years for a cure; the thief on the cross to whom Jesus promised eternal life; and the centurion who watched Jesus die and called him the Son of God -- to name only a few. Every time, an encounter with Jesus had an impact -- and those who believed, were changed.

Now, you may ask: how can that happen today? Jesus no longer walks this earth. How can I meet him face-to-face, today? Jesus still has an impact on people -- person to person. He can be seen through Scripture; encountered through prayer; mirrored in the lives of believers. It's kind of like this: the last time I went to get new glasses, I spent time in front of a big mirror trying on frames. After awhile, I noticed some movement in the mirror. Looking intently, I saw the silhouette of a living person. And I finally realized that I was looking at an employee working behind a one-way mirror. He'd been there, all the time.

As you read or hear God's Word, you often see only that which is on the surface: facts and figures, stories and events. But Scripture is more than that. It reveals a living person. It's a bit like that one-way mirror -- as we read, we begin to see the person behind it. Its words convey and make real the *living* Word. Through Scripture we can see a living person, Jesus Christ. If we do not, we are left with only facts and stories. It's the Holy Spirit who makes him real to you. So pray before you read the Bible, or hear a sermon or receive Communion. Pray that you would not just see what is superficial but that you would have the eyes to see Jesus. Pray, each time, that in this encounter -- whether in worship or reading Scripture or in the fellowship of other believers -- that you will meet him face-to-face. It's still happening to billions of people. I'll bet many of you here today know exactly what I'm talking about. Over the past 2000 years, Christianity has spread throughout the world through person-to-person encounters with Jesus himself.

So first, your task is simply to invite. Second, leave the results in Jesus' hands. And finally, **expect to see great things**. Remember what Jesus told Nathanael in our text this morning? "You will see angels ascending and descending" -- on what? Jacob's ladder? No. That's not what he said. He said, "upon the Son of Man" -- Jesus himself.

Jacob named the place where he'd had his dream, Beth-El (Bethel), the house of God. When he woke up he said,

"Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it." He was afraid and said,
"How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven."

With Nathanael, Jesus takes that reference and redefines it in himself. *Jesus* is the place where you find the Father. Jesus, on the cross, is the gate of Heaven. There he completed the Father's

work saying, "It is finished. Mission accomplished!" It is there that Jesus redeemed you and me. Nathanael saw it with his own eyes.

Expect to see great things. Redemption is that *greater thing* that you will see. *Redemption* means being bought back. It means being bought out of slavery and being set free. It means being raised from death and given new life. That's what Jesus did for you on the cross! That's the greater thing that Nathanael was privileged to see. The great gift of redemption is forgiveness and eternal life.

Is there anything greater in this world? God redeems you from sin and the grave, and then he creates a new life in you as you seek to please him. He transforms you into Christ-likeness. As you go and tell, he gives you the gift of watching him redeem the lives of others as well. You too, are privileged to see greater things, as a result of Jesus' death and resurrection. You have the privilege of making more disciples, because of what Jesus does in and through you.

Jesus has made us disciples, and disciples make more disciples. That's the pattern we see today between Philip and Nathanael. It's the pattern played out in the spread of Christianity ever since -- making disciples in every nation. It's what disciples do.

Jesus calls each person to follow him. It starts with you. First, you are invited to come and see. Then, Jesus himself makes impact on your life -- person to person. Then he sends you out to invite others -- to make more disciples as he, by the power of the Spirit, changes hearts and minds. Turns them around. And sends *them* out to invite more. And each time, believers will see greater things than they ever expected to see -- the power of God's redeeming work in Christ. It can turn cynics into believers. It can turn believers into doers -- making disciples who make more disciples. Amen.