

Bad First Impressions by Holly C. W. Aastuen  
January 18, 2015 John 1:43-51

Come, Holy Ghost, our souls inspire and lighten us with your celestial fire. For if you are with us then nothing else matters. And if you are not with us, then nothing else matters. Be with us, we pray, in the name of your beloved. Amen.

I've made some rather awkward attempts at invitational conversation. Like the time I invited Emily, the day care worker, to come to my church. She was my son, Benjamin's, favorite pre-school teacher and one day as I was picking him up I asked her about her plans for Christmas, which was only 3 days away. She shrugged her shoulders and said she didn't have much planned. I invited her to come check out the Christmas Eve services at my church. I talked about the services and how she would enjoy them and then Ben and I left.

She didn't come to the church and we never talked about our faith again until 6 months later when she was leaving to work at a different job that was closer to her home—which was 30 miles away. It was then that I realized that had I taken the time to get to know her a little better, I would have known that she didn't live in my community and had little reason to make such a long commute to go to worship.

I've also had some simple yet profound faith conversations. I've gotten to know the checkout person at the local grocery store who has in the course of the last year, lost her father to Alzheimer's, her aunt to old age and her son to cancer. She is one of my favorite checkout people at the grocery store and when I learned of all the tragedy she had faced this past year, I told her I would pray for her. She gave me a grateful smile and said, "Thank you."

I have a High School friend on Facebook who frequently posts comments that rail against the Christian Church and the Christian faith. In High School, I didn't know he was gay, but now that he's out of the closet, it's pretty clear that he feels oppressed by the anti-homosexual rhetoric he hears from the Christian Church. Last fall, when I was addressing homosexuality in a sermon series, I invited him to come and listen to a different Christian perspective. He politely declined, but read my sermon online and said, "I just read your sermon and was very impressed. You knocked it out of the park!!"

I think a lot of us do ourselves a disservice when we set up unrealistic expectations for our conversations with others. When I set myself up with the expectation that my invitation to worship will result in an instant agreement and the person will show up the very next Sunday, I'm setting myself up for disappointment. If I initiate a faith conversation with someone because I want to see if that person will come to my church, then I will inevitably be frustrated. Over the years I have invited, perhaps, a dozen people to come to my church, to come to worship, to see the play here at Aldersgate or to some other event. All of those times but one, it didn't result in their appearance at church and the one person who did accept my invitation and come only lasted a few Sundays before he stopped coming.

If I want to set myself up for success, I need to change my attitude and my expectations. Am I being invitational because I want to boost attendance or am I sharing

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my faith so as to open up the conversation for something deeper? What would happen if I didn't try to convince anyone of anything about faith, but instead simply sought to talk with others about faith in order to deepen our relationship?

Today's Bible reading finds Jesus in Galilee, inviting people to be his followers. He first found Andrew and Peter, two brothers who each followed Jesus. The next day Jesus finds Philip and says, "Follow me." And the first thing Philip does is find his friend Nathanael and invite him to follow Jesus as well. Now Philip wouldn't do this to any person he didn't already know well. We get the idea that the two of them are friends. And he knew what kind of person Nathanael was, namely, he knew he'd be skeptical. He knew he'd get a snide remark from his old friend, and sure enough he did. When Philip announced that the one spoken about in the law and the prophets was nearby and he was Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth, Nathanael immediately replied with a snarky: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

But even knowing how Nathanael would react, Philip went to him. You get the feeling that Philip thought that this news was too good not to share.

And after Nathanael gives the predictable response, Philip doesn't get all discouraged and say, "Oh, you're probably right. I must've been mistaken." Nor does he get defensive and try to convince Nathanael that this is the one. He doesn't even come up with some sort of snarky to put Nathanael in his place.

Instead, he takes it all in stride and says, "Come and see." Such simple yet profound words. These words could encompass all of evangelism and all of Christian life. Come and see. These are words we are all invited to say to those seeking something more from life.

Come and see. Come and see the one who knows everything about me. Come and see the one who lets me know every minute of every day how incredibly much I am loved. Come and see the one who forgives me no matter how many times I mess up.

We are the come and see people, who share that invitation with everyone and if people aren't ready to accept the invitation, it's not our job to convert. It's our job continue to invite.

Yet as simple and non-threatening as this invitation is, many of us still have a hard time making it. We aren't comfortable about talking about our faith in a culture that doesn't encourage such faith sharing and, more often than not, when our culture encounters faith talk, they generally perceive us to be a religious nut or a conversion fanatic.

But maybe, just maybe, one of those times that you say 'come and see,' someone will take you up on it and you have become their messenger of hope.

Philip never gave up on his cynical friend, Nathanael, even though Nathanael had a reputation for being hard to convince.

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This last week I stopped by the condominium where my parents used to live. My siblings and I are cleaning it out in anticipation of selling it, but first we need to go through many of their things and decide what to keep, what to sell and what to give away. I found on one of the bookshelves a journal of prayer requests as well as reflections on daily readings. As I read a little of my mother's daily prayers, I was reminded that my parents prayed for me every day.

They didn't do that when I was home, as far as I knew, but once I went off to college, they started praying together, praying for each of their children by name and for each child's concerns that they were aware of.

And as I was leafing through the prayer journal, it occurred to me that my parents were my greatest witnesses to who Christ is and what faithful living looks like. They were the ones who first said to me "Come and see," as they brought me to church even before I could talk. They brought me to worship and Sunday School and Youth Group and sent me on a Youth Mission Trip.

Sometimes giving someone a good impression of faith and what Christians are really like comes simply through living one's life faithfully.

I don't know if my parents invited others to church, I'm sure they did, but they rarely had faith conversations even with their family. Their lives were a constant witness to us, though about how a faithful life was lived and even though we children strayed from the church in our 20s, we all eventually made our way back into our own congregations, learning faith our own way, and raising our own children in an atmosphere of love and faith.

One day St. Francis of Assisi invited a young monk to join him on a trip into town to preach. The young monk was so honored to get such an invitation from St. Francis that he quickly accepted. All day long he and St. Francis walked through the streets and byways, alleys and suburbs, and they rubbed shoulders with hundreds of people.

At the end of the day, the two headed back home, however, not even once had St. Francis addressed a crowd, nor had he talked to anyone about the gospel. The young monk was greatly disappointed, and he said to St. Francis, "I thought we were going into town to preach." St. Francis responded, "My son, we have preached. We were preaching while we were walking. We were seen by many and our behavior was closely watched. It is of no use to walk anywhere to preach unless we preach everywhere as we walk!"

It's no secret that we, the church, have forgotten what it means to preach the gospel, what it means to bring to others the good news, what it means to evangelize. The word evangelism has become a dirty word in some churches, and if it isn't outright dismissed altogether, then it is relegated as a task for only those who have been ordained, or for

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those who are professional speakers, who make a living giving their testimonials and asking for altar calls.

We need to resurrect the practice of faith conversations with one another. We need to risk talking about what is important to us. Have respectful faith conversations with those you love. Pray for the members of your family and for their struggles. Be a witness to your love of God through all that you say and do.