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Epiphany 2A - January 15, 2017

Episcopalians aren't real good at evangelization. And I think I can relate to that, because I was raised in a tradition that did not really evangelize, either. I grew up in the Roman Catholic tradition, which I was taught to believe from a very early age was the true church of Christ - Holy Mother Church. We Catholics didn't particularly dislike people from other religions, we just never really thought much about them very much. Oh, occasionally we'd pray for them to see the light, because if they weren't heretics, at the very least they were in serious error. And, I was also taught to be very suspicious and even contemptuous of those who tried to evangelize me. In my first eighteen years I probably went to a Protestant church maybe twice.

I share this, so you can better appreciate how Elizabeth and I came to be Episcopalian. You see, we went out to dinner one night with two very good friends of ours, Donna and Terry. We love Donna and Terry dearly, and had great respect for them as people. They weren't religious, but were deeply spiritual people, who lived centered lives of service. And, it was over dinner that they said, "We'd like to tell you about the new church we're going to." I immediately lost my appetite. Oh, no, I thought, our good friends have found religion.

It's only by the grace of the Holy Spirit that I was able to suspend my discomfort enough to hear them out. They shared how they had found their lives lacking spiritually, and wanted to see if they might find connection with others in a faith community. They shared how some friends had invited them to church one Sunday, and found a joyful and loving place where serving others was central, and questioning one's beliefs was encouraged, and that the spiritual journey itself was honored. They were happy to find a place that was inclusive and not dogmatic, people of all types were welcomed and honored - the pious, the irreverent, rich, poor, black white, straight or gay, married or single. And, they loved the richness and beauty of the worship. They chose to share this with us, because they knew we had been searching for a

spiritual home. And, this was true. As in the three years Elizabeth and I had been married, we still had not landed in a church we both felt comfortable in. Our love of God was central to our relationship, but Elizabeth was never going to be Catholic, and I was never going to feel comfortable as a Presbyterian. So, one week we'd go to a Presbyterian Church, the next Catholic, sometimes Methodist. Our kids went to Catholic catechism, because we knew they needed some grounding. And, so Donna and Terry, who had been invited by friends, and whose lives had been transformed by their connection with Grace St. Paul's Episcopal Church, noticed our own searching, shared their experience, and invited us to come and check it out for ourselves. Well, it took a couple of months, but eventually we did attend church with them. It was Pentecost 1999, and our lives have never been the same.

This story has a lot in common with today's Gospel. See, the pattern that Jesus demonstrated again and again, in bringing people into the Good News was Noticing, Sharing, and Inviting. And that is how evangelization really works.

You see, first there's the noticing part. We have to be aware enough, awake enough to notice God working in our own lives, first and foremost. We can't share what we don't have. And, others are not going to be interested in following Jesus, if they don't notice Jesus in us. And, we also have to be aware enough to notice others who are searching, or others who are on a spiritual journey. In today's Gospel, Jesus who has just experienced Baptism, is noticed by the Andrew and Peter, and he notices them following him. Noticing God's work in our lives. Others noticing God in our lives, and our noticing others searching for God. Then comes the sharing. And, its sharing not telling, not teaching, not preaching. Sharing is pure gift, it's offering from the heart. And, of course you can't share what you don't have. But, if your life is transformed by becoming delighted in God and realizing God is delighted in you, people will notice, and will be open to hearing your experience, strength, and hope. And, it's not just sharing a lot of happy hoey, but being willing to share our authentic struggles of life and how God is with us in that struggle.

Then comes inviting. Jesus, said to the curious disciples, "Come and see." Donna and Terry invited us to church with them. I know this can

be the hard part, sometimes. But, we invite people to things all the time don't we? Concerts, sports events, dinner. So, why not church? And, it doesn't even have to be church. Invite them to join you in ministry, in serving others, whatever it is you do in living out your faith. Inviting can also be about inviting people to look at life differently. If your life is filled with Faith, Hope, and Love rather than Cynicism, Fear, and Resentment, why wouldn't you want to invite others into a new way of seeing life. Of course, inviting, like sharing should be pure gift, without any ownership of the outcome. That's up to the Spirit, not you. But, the Spirit does work. Just look at the growth we've experienced the last three years. I'd venture to say that most of the new faces in the pews were invited.

So where do you see your need to grow in this continuum- Noticing, sharing, inviting...?

If you're in the Noticing place right now, perhaps taking time each day to notice the presence of God in your life and in those around you is a good place to concentrate. Or perhaps noticing where God needs to be, places of distress or turmoil, and then over time gradually noticing where God actually is.

Or, if you're needing to grow in the Sharing phase right now, maybe praying for the courage to live your faith "out loud" so to speak. Talking openly about God working in your life. A good place to start practicing sharing is with people here in church or your spouse, or children. If you've noticed God's presence in your life, don't be afraid to share it. And, then inviting. This can be a hard one for us Episcopalians or those from a Catholic tradition. But, I think, if you've grown in the first two phases - Noticing, and Sharing, the inviting comes easy. I really think that the reason we're often so reluctant to invite is that we're either not grounded in our own faith or not living it fully, we don't regularly notice God in our lives, and don't share when we do. And, why should anyone want to join us in church, if they don't see God making a difference in our lives.

Jesus asked us to go and make disciples of all nations. This is how God intends to fully bring about his Heavenly Kingdom, through our Noticing, Sharing, and Inviting. And, at times, it can seem a daunting task. The levels of fear, anger, hatred, and injustice we see can be

disheartening. But, from the beginning of creation until now, God has delighted in taking little things -- things the world decides are nothing -- and doing something wonderful through them. So also with our attempts to share faith, our tentative ventures into telling others what we've seen and felt. They may feel like very small efforts, yet the God who brought light from darkness and raises the dead to life wants to -- and will! -- do marvelous things through them. You are the body of Christ, go out into the world and be the Body of Christ.