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The Federated Church of Hyannis  
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## **FAITH BY REFERRAL**

John 1:43-51

My earliest memory of church was sitting in worship with my parents. I had no clue what was being said most of the time. What I do remember is that when it was time for the sermon I would ask my dad for his watch. He would let me hold it and what I would do is stare at the second hand going around. I knew that it would make that circle a certain number of times and the preacher would finally stop preaching.

What I later came to understand is that it was a form of self-hypnosis. I became mesmerized by looking at the second hand going around and around. It was a child's way of being part of worship when there were things I could not understand. But the important part is that it was my parents who first brought me to church to worship and to learn about Jesus. Which leads to today's big number.

Today's big number is 85. It is commonly estimated that 85% of the people who end up in church do so because someone invited them and brought them. The number of people just coming on their own, people who are simply attracted because of the building or location or program or denomination or advertisements on radio and in the newspaper and websites counts for only 15% of those who attend.

There are things that help. It helps to have a nice website and newspaper ad and an attractive front entrance and special events, but it all gets activated with the invitation: Come and see. If you want to know about the most effective program of membership evangelism it is simply this personal invitation: Come and see. This is how 85% of the people who join a church first come – because a member of their family, friends, acquaintances or stranger invited them.

Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." From time to time I hear people ask, "Have you found Jesus?" It would appear – at least in the case of Philip – that Jesus found him. Someone once asked the great evangelist D. T. Niles about places where he

brought Jesus and he responded by saying that he never brought Jesus to anyone. Jesus had already been there. He just had to tell them who he is and where to look and what to see.

We really don't know much about Philip except that he became one of the first evangelists in the church by inviting Nathanael and because of him the whole history of the church is different and better. There does not seem to be anything special about Philip except that Jesus called him. And there is nothing that special about most of us except that when Jesus calls us to follow him something extraordinary can happen.

What Jesus did was to inspire Philip to say to Nathanael: "Come and see." Maybe you have done what Philip did; you brought your family or friends to church. Good for you. The future of the church depends on people who say, "Come and take a look."

What Philip did when Jesus told him to follow him was fairly simple. He went and found Nathanael, told him who called him to be a follower and then said, "Come and see." Jesus found Philip and Philip found Nathanael, and that is the way the church has grown from the first century to the twenty-first century.

Most of us, when asked to make an invitation, respond with the "but I's" "But I...don't know what to say...but I don't feel I can do it...but I don't ever quite get around to it...but I don't think my friends would be interested...but I think they already have a church they don't go to." All that was necessary for Philip to succeed was to say, "Come and see."

I am reminded of the story about a boy who tried out for a school play. The parents were very interested in what important part their son would play – singing, acting, dancing or even direction. The boy returned home from school very excited that he was chosen to take part. When they asked, "What part?" the boy answered, "I was chosen to cheer and applaud." That is an absolutely critical part that needs to be filled: to cheer and applaud and share the enthusiasm.

Philip did not give much in the way of an explanation, mostly an invitation and his enthusiasm: Come and see. There was not an argument or confrontation just: come and see. There is no promise of anything just: come and see. Philip did not say, "Just take my word for it," but "come and

see so you can make your own judgment. Make your own decision, but base it on your experience, not just on your opinion.” Calling attention to our arguments or our proof or our popularity can divert attention to itself and away from where we should look – to Jesus.

There is an old story about a church in Ystad, Sweden. It seems that in 1716, King Charles XII of Sweden announced to that little town that he was going to come and visit them, and that he would worship in the village church. The pastor of the church got all excited about the presence of the king in his congregation. He decided he would put aside the prescribed scripture for that Sunday, and he would deliver a sermon in the form of praise for the greatness of the royal family.

He did that. Three months later, a gift arrived at the church in a big box. The pastor opened it up. It was a present from the king. Inside was a life-size crucifix, a life-like statue of Jesus on the cross, with this instruction: “Place this on the pillar opposite the pulpit, so that the one who stands there will always be reminded of his proper subject.” We need to remember that our focus should always be on the same thing: come and see our savior.

Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.” Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Jesus was born in Bethlehem, but his home was Nazareth, and Nazareth really was a nowhere place.

This was part of a territory the Assyrians had captured seven centuries before. It was never mentioned anywhere in the Hebrew Scriptures and was not included in any Hebrew writings until three centuries after Jesus’ birth. Nazareth was in the hinterlands – and I don’t even know what hinterlands means, but they were there. Do you know what comes out of hick towns? Let’s hear from guesses. Hicks – this is not a tough question.

It reminds me of my hesitancy in telling people where I went to college. It is a good college and has gotten a lot better since I graduated. It has a good church connection and a solid academic reputation, but who wants to say, “I graduated from Defiance College?” Some have heard of it, but mostly it evokes questions about “defying what?” which is why I am sometimes tempted to say that I studied at Harvard and Princeton because I did take classes there and it avoids having to explain my college’s name.

Then I am asked, “Where did you grow up?” I end up mumbling something about Cleveland, Ohio. I grew up in the days when Johnny Carson was making a career out of belittling Cleveland. It was well deserved. I lived there when the Cuyahoga River caught on fire. I lived there when the Mayor of the great city of Cleveland caught his own hair on fire. I was there and could see from my house the smoke and fire when riots occurred in 1968 after Dr. King was killed.

In my last year of seminary I was sitting in a lecture in Boston given by Dr. Harold F. Beck, a great biblical scholar, when seemingly out of nowhere he said, “Can anything good come out of Cleveland?” I was not about to volunteer where I was born. A lot of people have wondered the same thing. One at a time the great mills and factories have closed. It has been given the distinction as having the worst school system of any major city in this country.

It is an easy question to ask, “Can anyone good come out of this family?” “Can anything good come out of this town?” “Can anything good come out of this church?” But God finds a way, and from a small captive people, to common folks in a little village, people with no credentials except those God gave came the answer: Yes, in spite of the past, in spite of the appearance, God can make something good come out of Nazareth and out of Cleveland and out of our family, our town, and our church.

Methodist Bishop Will Willimon wrote: “Any God who would impregnate a poor, unmarried woman, then send a messenger to tell her that she is ‘blessed among women,’ will stoop to almost anything.” Our God is a God who stoops to people and places we would never even consider.

We have a God who is forever surprising and forever confounding our expectations. Today there are times I say, “You should go and see Cleveland. You should see Cleveland’s world class zoo and hear their world class orchestra. You should visit the new stadiums downtown and experience the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Go and see.” We say the same thing when we urge family and friends to come to the Cape – come and drive down 6A. You just have to see it.

As to the remark by Nathanael, there is no evidence that Nazareth had a bad reputation. It is more likely reflective of a small town rivalry with Cana

where Nathaniel came from. Maybe you have been like Nathanael raising some question but you finally did go and see. You were not argued into belief rather you were referred to faith, just told to go and see for yourself.

At that meeting Jesus said to Nathanael that he saw him under the fig tree. It may seem to us like a random comment, but it is under such trees that the great teachers of Israel would gather students to study scripture and learn the ways of God. A fig tree is about fifteen feet tall and its branches spread out about 25 feet in width like an umbrella, creating a space that is almost like a private room.

If someone wanted to get away from the chaos of a one-room house, he or she would sit under the fig tree. They would sit there to study scripture or to reflect or to pray. Sitting under a fig tree was a sign of seeking and praying for God's living presence.

Nathanael was astounded when Jesus said he had seen Nathanael under a fig tree. Jesus responded saying in effect, "There is a lot more yet to be seen." There is the human capacity to see the here and now, to see a new walkway or to hear the choir sing. But there is much more to see and hear. There is a whole new world beyond this world and we are just getting a glimpse of it.

Nathanael would have known the story to which Jesus referred about Jacob, one of the patriarchs of Israel, how Jacob had cheated his brother Esau out of his inheritance, how he had to flee for his life, how God finally came to him in a dream, how he saw angels ascending and descending, how a new promise was made to him, and how ultimately he stopped fleeing from his brother and from his sin.

He saw the heavens opened and the angels ascending and descending. He sought to make restitution and to be reconciled with his brother and his God. Keep looking Nathanael. In time you will see. You will see much more than you can even see at this moment.

Nathaniel's first response was to ask a question which is understandable, but the nature of faith is that it is not calculating. If you keep track of how many prayers are answered and how many are not, math is involved, not faith. If you need a guarantee that your giving will result in a personal benefit to you, it is not faith. If you need science to back up claims of a creator God, that is not faith. Faith does not calculate. It does not insist on empirical evidence.

It is like the great prayer of Anselm who was the tenth century Archbishop of Canterbury. He prayed, “Lord, I am not trying to make my way to your height, for my understanding is in no way equal to that, but I do desire to understand a little of your truth, which my heart already believes and loves. I do not seek to understand so that I can believe, but I believe so that I may understand. And what is more, I believe that unless I do believe, I shall never understand.”

We are not asking people to follow Jesus because it is logical. Because it is a call of faith it is to something we can see only dimly. It started with Jesus offering the faith to Philip and Philip offering the faith to Nathaniel and from there it spread.

From time to time churches go through a long range planning process to establish goals and objectives and strategies and things like that. But Jesus made it fairly simple. The first mission statement of the church is still the best one: “Go make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” That is still our mission – to go and make disciples. Everything else is an extension of that.

This is how the Gospel has been shared and disciples made from the very beginning. Someone like Philip says to his friend Nathanael, “Come and see.” When churches grow, that is how they grow. People get excited about their savior, they get excited about their faith, they get excited about their church and they say to family and friend and even stranger, “Come and see.”