Big Brother

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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John 1:35-42

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I have an older brother. His name is Tom. He’s the best big brother anybody could ever have. Let me tell you a story about Tom and his improbable journey of faith.

Tom was a committed bachelor into his early 30s. He never put much effort into dating. Tom gave Chris and me the gift of a bottle of wine at Christmas with the invitation to join him for a dinner at a fancy restaurant. Chris urged him to bring a date to dinner but, predictably, Tom declined the offer.

“That’s okay,” Chris announced, “I’ve already got a date picked out for you.” Chris and I worked with a campus ministry in those days, and she was a prayer partner with a young, single woman named Debbie. Chris asked me what I thought of her blind date idea. I had my doubts. Tom and Debbie were very different people. But Chris was undeterred. She was convinced it was worth a try, and Tom agreed to the plan.

The four of us enjoyed a pleasant meal together. Debbie and Tom seemed to be having a good time. We were relieved. Whatever came of it, the evening was already a success.

We dropped Debbie off at the Robert Morris College dorm where she worked as residence hall director. The three of us drove home together. Chris asked Tom what he thought of Debbie. My brother, who is not given to superlatives, said enthusiastically, “She’s decent!” Back in the day, “decent” was equivalent to “awesome” or “beast.”

They began dating. Debbie shared her faith with Tom and he opened his life to Christ. They were married 38 years ago. In April, they celebrated the 39th anniversary of their first date.

I thought of this story when I titled this sermon Big Brother. It’s a story of one brother influencing another brother to come to faith. Andrew, the older brother may be a relative unknown to you. He brings his younger brother Simon to Jesus, who becomes famous in the annals of Scripture. You know him as Peter, St. Peter.

Here’s the story. Andrew is a disciple of John the Baptist in our story. John’s role is to prepare people for the coming of the Messiah. When Jesus arrives on the scene, John announces, “Look, the Lamb of God” (John 1:36). That’s all it takes for John’s two disciples to switch allegiances. They set out to follow Jesus.
Jesus sees Andrew and his friend following him. “What do you want?” he asks (1:37). Jesus’ quest seems abrupt, but actually it’s a gracious way for Jesus to help them tease out what they’re looking for.

“Where are you staying?” they ask awkwardly (1:37). Our narrator John supplies the detail that it’s the 10th hour. Since Roman time began with sunrise, the 10th hour would translate to 4 PM. They are asking to spend more time with Jesus.

“Come and see,” Jesus says to their question about lodging. The Greek word for see Jesus uses is not an allusion to physical sight. It’s a word referring to spiritual sight; what we would call insight.

We’re not told what they talk about that evening. But we learn from John that the first thing Andrew does after spending time with Jesus is to find his brother Simon. “We have found the Messiah,” Andrew announces to Simon (1:41).

Simon accompanies Andrew to meet Jesus. Jesus takes one look at Simon and declares, “You are Simon, son of John; you will be called Cephas” (1:42). Cephas is an Aramaic name, which is a cousin language of Hebrew. Its Greek equivalent is Petros or Peter, meaning rock. Often in Scripture, people are given new names to coincide with their new spiritual identity.

Peter is anything but a rock in the gospels. He can be impulsive and prone to wild mood swings. He doesn’t act much like a rock man until Jesus is raised from the dead and the Spirit of God takes up residence in his life.

Andrew’s simple gesture of finding his brother and bringing him to Jesus has enormous implications for this gospel story. Three things stand out in the way Andrew makes this invitation to his brother.

First, Andrew shares a relationship of trust with his brother that makes talking about Jesus natural. They enjoy a trusting relationship. Peter doesn’t have to invest energy in whether to trust Andrew with the news about Jesus. He knows instinctively that his brother has his best interests at heart.

People will be far more willing to listen to what we have to say if we have already forged a relationship of trust with them. If trust isn’t well
established, our testimony will lack credibility. Trust is so crucial in having significant conversations with people.

Second, Andrew doesn’t pressure his brother into believing. He simply shares, “We have found the Messiah.” He tells Peter what he has seen and heard.

Nobody likes to be pressured into believing. People who come on really strong in matters of faith can be such a turnoff.

Third, Andrew doesn’t predetermine whether his brother will be interested. He doesn’t decide beforehand whether Peter will be receptive to his message.

Some of you will remember the name Alice Cooper. He is considered the godfather of Shock Rock. His extreme theatrics and stage appearance in the 70s and 80s engendered both outrage and a huge following.

Alice Cooper’s father was a missionary to Apache Indians in Arizona and his grandfather was a pastor for 75 years. He grew up going to church. Of his own admission, his journey is a prodigal son story. He was wasted by drug and alcohol addiction and his marriage was in shambles when he gave his life to Christ. He’s a most unlikely Christian convert. He said of his shocking turnaround, “Some of the people you think are farthest away are actually the ones most apt to listen.”

Jesus said to his disciples after his resurrection and before his ascension to heaven, “You will be my witnesses” (Acts 1:8). A witness in a court of law is someone who testifies to what they have seen and heard. Similarly, we witness to what we have seen and heard about the risen Christ.

Christians aren’t the only ones who witness. Everybody witnesses to what they enjoy. If you enjoy remodeling, you’ll talk home improvements to people. If you enjoy good food, you’ll talk about your preferred restaurants. If you enjoy good music, you’ll talk about your favorite musicians. Witnessing for Christ isn’t fundamentally any different from witnessing about home remodeling, good music or fine cuisine.

Here’s the challenge. There are two subjects verboten to talk about in polite society: politics and religion. People can’t seem to talk about these topics without becoming shrill and argumentative. Can’t we talk about
faith like Andrew did with his brother? Can’t we begin from a place of trust? Isn’t there a talk about faith without becoming argumentative and applying pressure?

I was raised going to church but I didn’t have a clue what it meant to follow Christ. I thought faith was something you inherited and were born into. I was 19 before someone shared with me that I needed to give my life to Christ. My first reaction is why I am learning about this now? How come nobody ever told me this before now?

Some of you came to faith in Christ as a child. You came to this faith gradually over time. For some reason, I needed to be hit over the head with it. Someone needed to actually verbalize that I needed to give my life to Christ. Who are the people in your life who need to know of Christ’s saving love?

In our daily devotional this week we invited you to identify three people in your life with whom you would like to share your faith. Who are people in your sphere of influence—family, friends, business associates and neighbors—with whom you would like to share your belief in Christ?

Pray for natural opportunities to share what’s important to you. Talk to God about your friend before you talk about God to your friend. I’m reminded of a verse from 1st Peter, “Always be ready to give a reason for the hope that lies in you” (3:15).

Listen carefully to what people say they value. Witnessing involves active listening. Listen to what people talk about. Sooner or later they will identify what is important to them.

Consider what you would say to someone who wanted to know more about faith. If you had a few minutes to share Christ with someone, what would you say? What would be your elevator speech?

I remember my first 7th grade dance. My friends and I were excited about our inaugural dance at the middle school gym. I remember it like it was yesterday. The girls lined up on one side and the boys on the other side. In-between was no man’s land. Everyone was there and ready to dance, but nobody danced. It was customary in those days for a boy to ask a girl to dance. But the boys couldn’t muster up the courage to ask a girl to dance. I wanted to ask a certain girl but I chickened out. It was so painful!
Here’s the kicker. A few days after the dance, I learned that the girl I wanted to ask would have danced with me if only I had asked.

Are you willing to make “the ask” when it comes to faith? There are people who need you to initiate conversations about spiritual things.

I gave my life to Christ when people were willing to ask me about faith. They didn’t pressure me. They didn’t predetermine whether I would be interested.

The gospel message is rather simple. Come and see. Go and tell. Come to Jesus and go tell other people about him. Always be ready to give a reason for the hope that lives in you.