

Converting Evangelism
Genesis 12:1-9; 1 Peter 3:13-17
John 20:19-23; November 9 2014
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I. Introduction

Last week I had the chance to go to Boston to meet with a group of clergy leaders from around the northeastern jurisdiction to talk about an issue that is important for us here at Metropolitan, which is working on behalf of equality for our GLBTQ brothers and sisters, and wrestling with our church's stance on that. And frankly, I was anticipating a fairly contentious conversation. But the man who facilitated the dialogue started us off going around this circle, and he asked us to talk about what brought us in our personal histories to the place that we are on this issue.

And what happened was a very remarkable thing: people started to share in a very profound and self-revelatory way some of their stories and how those stories shaped them and brought them to their positions on this issue. It didn't mean that we all came to agreement, but what it changed was how we engaged one another. All of a sudden we started to engage one another as brothers and sisters who loved one another and cared for one another even in the midst of our differences.

We've been talking for the last couple of weeks about stories, how our stories shape the people around us, how their stories shape us, and part of the subcontext, the subtheme for that conversation, is that stories offer us an important perspective on the call to be evangelists, the call to do evangelism.

II. Healthy evangelism

Evangelism is a term that makes a lot of us in our church turn the other way quickly and run because we've all seen it done badly. We have seen places where evangelism was about judgment and about fear, about trying to instill other people with the fear of eternal damnation and use that as a tool for trying to turn them to the arms of a loving God. And even frankly one that's been done well sometimes in history or done with the spirit of love, but there are overtones of colonialism in how it often happens that are very uncomfortable for us. So, we need to figure out how to engage this discipline in a different way because it's not an optional discipline for us as Christians.

It is, I would argue, one of our most primal, most basic calls as disciples of Jesus Christ. Jesus doesn't, for example, say to us, "Have glorious worship." Jesus doesn't say to us, "Go and learn as much as you can about the faith." What Jesus says is, "Go and make disciples of all nations." What Jesus says is, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." At our very core, we are people who are about disciple-making, about evangelism. You all know, I suspect, what the motto, the vision statement of the Methodist church is, right? "To make disciples for the transformation of the world."

Those two always go hand in hand. But the call to make disciples is at the very heart of who we are as children of God. So, we can't avoid that. We need to figure out how to do it in a way that is life-giving and not fear-inducing. Amen? And stories, I think, do that.

Peter says in this beautiful epistle lesson that we just heard this morning that healthy evangelism is not fearful but is -- and I love this phrase -- "a matter of respect and gentleness." That's how we are to present the gospel. And stories give us a way of doing that because when I tell you my story, it's not about me being right and you being wrong. It's not about my having the answer that you desperately need for your salvation. It's about my being able to tell you how I have seen the Holy Spirit move in my life with the hope that maybe you see some similar things in your life. To do that successfully, of course, we need to be paying attention to where God is moving in our lives.

III. Attending

The French mystic and philosopher Simone Weil used to say that prayer is paying attention. Prayer is paying attention. And we have spent a lot of time as a congregation over the last couple of years looking at the whole issue of attentiveness. We spent a series during Lent a year or two ago looking at Brother Lawrence and practicing the presence of God and being mindful of God's presence in every moment of every day. We spent a lot of time this summer looking at the Buddhist tradition of mindfulness. Again, how we stay aware of the movement of the Spirit all the time. Evangelism starts with attentiveness. It starts with our watching where God is moving in our lives. It starts with watching how God is moving in other people's lives.

"Evangelism," says Leonard Sweet in his wonderful book *Nudge* "is the art of attention, attending to life and attending to God." "Evangelism," he says, "is awakening each other to the God who is already there. Evangelism is nudging people --," I love that image, "-- is nudging people to pay attention to the mission of God in their lives and to the necessity of responding to that initiative in ways that birth new realities." Nudgers, evangelists, pay attention to where God is moving in their lives and point at that as they tell their stories.

This is another Leonard Sweet quote: he says, "Nudgers give attendance more than they take attendance." We love to take attendance. What's my first question on Monday morning? "How many people were in church on Sunday?" Right? Because that's what we pay attention to. No, that's not what evangelism is about. Evangelism is not about how many people have come to sit in the pews. Evangelism is paying attention to what's going on in those people's lives. It's listening to their stories and identifying the places where the Holy Spirit is at work. It's telling your story, my story, so that other people can hear how the Holy Spirit is working.

When you look at Jesus' actions in the Gospel of John that we had our reading from this morning, Jesus is always doing dramatic actions. He is changing water into wine.

He is raising Lazarus from the dead. He is feeding the 5,000. John never calls those miracles. He calls them signs. Because what they're about is pointing to where God is at work right in the midst of us right now. Evangelists are sign pointers. They're pointing at where the Holy Spirit is moving. We're paying attention and then pointing.

IV. Being Vulnerable

The difficult thing about sharing our stories however is that often those stories, as Annie shared very beautifully this morning -- thank you, Annie -- often those stories involve places that are really hard for us. They involve places in our lives where we had been broken, where we had been hurt, and have through that received the grace and resurrection power of the Holy Spirit, and it's very hard to tell some of those stories because we don't like being vulnerable. Amen?

I just told you a few minutes ago about this very powerful experience I had in Boston last week because the level of sharing was so deep. What happened there was the first person in that circle told a story that was about a place in his life that was very, very painful. And what that allowed to happen was it gave everybody permission in that group to be vulnerable, to share stuff that was really close to who we are and stuff that we normally hide. And what was even more powerful in this case last week is the person who did that, the first person in the circle, happened to be one of our bishops, and bishops in my experience don't usually like being vulnerable. That's not what they are good at. And it was so powerful to hear one of our bishops share some very raw stuff. And again, what that allowed to happen is for everybody there to start being honest.

That kind of vulnerability is very hard to do, and I think it's the reason that we avoid evangelism. I don't actually think we avoid evangelism because we have heard obnoxious evangelists. I don't think we do. I think we use that as an excuse. I think we avoid evangelism because talking about where we see God moving in our lives is so deep and so personal that it's hard to share. It involves making ourselves vulnerable to somebody else and we don't do that easily.

The story that Sia just read about Abraham's call is about being vulnerable, because what God calls Abraham to do is to be an agent of God's reconciliation and power in the world, and He does that by calling Abraham out of Abraham's home. He calls Abraham out of the place that he has grown up with the people that he knows, the economic system that he's part of, and calls him into a whole new place, calls Abraham to give up all of the things that give him security and move into a place where he's vulnerable. And, of course, paradoxically, it is exactly that vulnerability that makes Abraham and makes us powerful tools for God's redemptive work.

In another quote from Len Sweet, he says, "When love is the motivation for evangelism, nudging is love in action and the cracks in our broken vases are where Jesus leaks out first." I like that image. "The cracks in our broken vases are the places where Jesus leaks out first." Our places of brokenness become very powerful

gifts to somebody else who is experiencing brokenness, and our stories of how the Holy Spirit has worked in our life through those places is often exactly what a person who is in pain needs to hear.

V. Sowing

So, evangelism, dear friends, is not about knowing theology, it is not about having the right answers, it is not about somebody else's salvation. It's about our telling our story in a way that someone else can identify with. That's all it takes. You do not have to know the answers to all of the difficult theological problems. It's simply a matter of sharing your story. So, contrary to the common definition, evangelism is not about winning souls for Christ. You hear that phrase a lot. Because I'll tell you a little secret -- we can't win souls for Christ. We can't do it. It's not in our power. That's something that God gets to do. So our goal in doing evangelism is not to bring about somebody else's conversion or salvation. God does that in God's time. What we are called to do is to scatter the seeds that will at some point come to fruition in a person's life.

"Nudging," Leonard Sweet says, "is more about sowing than reaping. It's not about gathering in people to be saved. It's about scattering the seeds of God's good news and letting God start the miracle of plants growing from those seeds."

In our passage from John, Jesus meets the fearful disciples in the upper room and says, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." The work of healing and reconciliation, the work of allowing God's resurrection power to move is now your work and you can't be locked up here in an upper room for that to happen. You've got to get out and tell your story. And then, Jesus breathes on them, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Because it's not about the gifts and graces that we bring. It's about God moving through our lives to breathe on somebody else. "Evangelists," Len Sweets says, "nudge people to life. Evangelists nudge people to take deep breaths. Evangelists blow breath into people."

So, dear friends, I want to suggest that you are here because on some level you see God moving in your life. You are not here to listen, as wonderful as it is, to the wonderful music that we celebrate every Sunday with. You are not here to listen to me pontificate Sunday after Sunday. You are here because you know that God is doing something in your life and you're responding to it. You respond with your presence. You respond with a lot of hard work that we pour into all of our ministries. You respond with all of the gifts that God has given you for leadership and teaching. You respond with your financial resources to make all of the work possible. You're here because God is doing something in your life and you've got to let that out.

Somebody in your life right now needs to hear that story. Somebody in your life right now needs to hear how you have seen the Holy Spirit work in your life so that they can start to look for where the Holy Spirit is working in their life. The Holy Spirit is at work

in each of our lives whether we know it or not, and our call is to start nudging people to pay attention to where the Spirit is moving.

VI. Conclusion

Several years ago, we made a commitment as a congregation to engage in the discipline of radical hospitality. Do you all remember that conversation? It was not an easy conversation initially. There was some resistance to the idea. No resistance to hospitality but “radical hospitality” was a little bit off-putting. But we dug into that and we started working on it with a very high level of intentionality. And I can’t tell you how many people I talk to on a weekly basis who have come through our doors and have told me, “I have never been so welcomed by a church community.” We have made that part of who we are. And I want to invite us to in the same way claim this call to evangelism, to re-claim this call to evangelism and make a culture of evangelism part of who we are as well. It is at the heart of who we are as Christian disciples. It is at the heart of what it means to be church. And that means paying attention to where the Holy Spirit is moving and sharing that story with somebody who needs to hear it. Someone who needs to hear a word of good news and hope.

Amen.