

Evangelism is...  
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Evangelism is.....Sharing the Good News  
Luke 4:16-21 and Matthew 28:16-20

A pastor gave a message one Sunday on evangelism and one family thought they had better do something. So they invited their neighbors to dinner the following Friday night. When it came to the meal, the believers were keen to show their neighbours that they upheld Christian standards in their home. So she asked little 5-year-old Johnny to say grace.

Little Johnny was a bit shy. "I don't know what to say" There was an awkward pause, followed by a reassuring smile from the boy's mother. "Well darling," she said, "Just say what Daddy said at breakfast this morning." Obediently, the boy repeated, "Oh God, we've got those bad people coming to dinner tonight."

This joke is a good opener because it encapsulates many stereotypes we have about evangelism. Mostly about judging other people under a veneer of friendliness.

What does the word evangelism mean to you?  
Think about it for a moment; what images come to your mind.

People coming and knocking on your door.  
People standing on street corners yelling about the end of the world.  
People asking if you have been saved.  
People telling you you are going to hell if you don't believe the way they do.  
People handing you disturbing literature that spells out damnation for all kinds of groups perhaps one you are a part of unless you repent.  
People going to foreign countries and destroying cultures to make people just like them.

I think these are many images of evangelism. These are often the first images we think of when we hear the word evangelism.

So what is evangelism? Is the word redeemable?

It is interesting to note that evangelism is not present in all religions. Some religions are evangelistic, actively inviting people become a part, or convert, and some are not. I mean when was the last time you had two Buddhists come knocking on your door?

Traditionally, Jews, Buddhists and Hindus do not evangelize. Christians and Muslims do.

I think the problem for many of us is that sharing the good news as we are called to do, is too often followed by sharing the bad news.

We are called to evangelize. Jesus tells us to share the message of love and hope and healing and grace. To share that God loves all people. To share the ideas that the peacemakers are blessed and that we are stewards not owners of the earth. To share the burdens of all. We are called to speak about this. We are called to make disciples of all nations. And to share the good news.

But too often this is followed by the bad news. The invitation, “hey I go to church and I have found it to be a wonderful place to find meaning in my life”, does not have to be followed up with, “and if you don’t convert you are going to hell.” These do not have to be linked.

I think this is one of our real problems with evangelism. We have experienced so much bad evangelism.

So let me ask you this:

If you go out to eat and really enjoy the restaurant, what happens next? What happens next when you see your friends? You tell them about it. “What’s so great about it?” they ask. Oh the atmosphere, the service, the food was perfectly cooked, or so interesting. We’re going back soon.

If you find a good church where you feel included, where you experience God, where you find meaning for your life, where your children learn about the true valuable things in life, where you do more good with other people than is possible by yourself, what do we do? Well, typically, we tell no one.

We are silent or at least very quiet. Why? If this is such a good thing, why are we quiet?

We worry we will upset other people if we bring up religion. It is, after all, one of the taboo topics in polite conversation. No religion, politics or sex. We don’t want to offend anyone. Perhaps they will be embarrassed.

But all of you arrived here somehow. You didn’t just spontaneously grow out of the pew.

Why are you here? Why do you come to church? I could think of some answers.

Perhaps you grew up here. You were raised in this church. It is home and comfortable. You are part of the tradition

You were invited either by a person here, an advertisement, the website, or driving by and seeing the sign out front.

And now, your church friends are here. And, it is more meaningful to get up early, sit on hard wooden pews and listen to me talk for 20 minutes than to be in some comfortable café having eggs and coffee and chatting...

Why are you here, really?

Maybe you live alone or are lonely even with others around. Maybe here is a community which you feel a part of –it’s a good feeling. Maybe there are others who are lonely and looking for a community, too.

Maybe you have a lot of questions about life. What’s the meaning of all this, what happens when I die, why is there war? And here you find people willing to ask those questions and sometimes find answers. Often those answers lead to more questions but here you find a sense that this Christian tradition and the way this particular denomination and this particular church interprets it, values wrestling with those questions. I imagine there are others with questions just like yours looking for a place to talk about them.

Maybe at some point in your life you found out that the money you had and the things you accumulated and the power you had over other people etc. didn’t matter at all--all of it was worthless--unless you used those things for the good of others, for the good of all.

That the empty space we have within won't be filled by stuff. But it can be filled by God, by Christ, by love of neighbor.

So, in your day to day travels around town, through your neighborhood etc. don't you think you pass people who have this same empty space within? There are those who are looking for what would warm that spot inside them. Would you tell them what you found here? Invite them?

There are many ways to do evangelism. "Evangelism is a hungry beggar telling another beggar where to find bread." Evangelism is a person longing for community telling another where to find a place to belong.

The scriptures I chose today a bookends on how Jesus thought about evangelism. Evangel being the word for good news. So evangelism being spreading good news.

First, he stands up in the Temple at the very, very beginning of his ministry, he is fresh out of the 40 days in the wilderness. And he says:

I'm here to bring good news.  
good news to the poor,  
Sent me to announce pardon to prisoners  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
To set the burdened and battered free,  
to announce, "This is God's year to act!"

Jesus' evangelism is to tell the poor and the suffering that God cares and is on their side. And Jesus is going to try to do something about it.

Is that something we can get on board with? That God cares about the poor and the suffering and that we are going to try to do something about it? I can sign on for that.

That is the good news Jesus is talking about. Evangelism that says, hey if you are lonely, I've got a place I know about where you can come and meet some people who care. And if you are suffering I know a place where people can get you connected with others who can help and who will pray with you. And if you are gay and kicked out of your church, I know a place that will love on you. And if you are divorced and told you can't have communion, I know a place that would love to have you at the table--everyone is invited.

That is sharing the good news.

You see there are many ways to do evangelism.  
We can knock on doors.  
We can be a building that is open to our community neighbors so they can gather here.  
We can put up signs.  
We can show up for events and marches around town that seek to protect kids from violence and make sure those with disabilities are included.

We can answer honestly when people ask us, "so what did you do this weekend?" "Well, I watched the game and did some house projects on Saturday. We went out on Saturday night. Then on Sunday....well... I went to church..."

Here is another thought on evangelism. If we don't share this legacy, this heritage, this gospel, this witness, what's going to happen next?

I am not talking about who will pay the bills on the building. I'm talking about who will stand up and fight for justice, who will stand up and say you are welcome, God welcomes you and we welcome you, to those who are pushed out of other churches?

That is the idea behind the kind of evangelism the United Church of Christ does. There are people out there who WANT to come to church but can't find a church to go to because other churches don't want them. Maybe they are biracial. Maybe they have a mental illness. Maybe they ask too many questions. Maybe they are transgender. Maybe they are a single parent or just divorced. How are these folks and other folks who want to find a connection to God supposed to know they are welcome here, they would find home here, unless we invite them?

My friends, it is not the 50s anymore. People don't just show up at churches anymore. They are invited. Just like inviting someone to be a Facebook friend. The worst someone can say is no. And maybe a moment of awkwardness happens. But letting folks know that we are inviting them not because we think they are damned, not because we want their money, not because we need another committee member, but because we know of a good thing, something that has the possibility of changing their life in good and deep ways, and think they would enjoy it too. Even more than eggs and the Sunday paper.

To evangelize is to share the good news. To evangelize is to invite.

At the other end of his ministry, after his resurrection, Jesus stands with his disciples one last time and tells them to go out and make disciples of all nations. And that he will be with us. No I don't believe in forced baptisms or even necessarily baptisms are needed at all unless desired. Can you be a part of this community as a Buddhist or Hindu or atheist? Yes, you can. Can you join this group of people as we work toward justice and love in this place? Yes, we'd love to have you.

Will we invite you over for dinner (I hope you do that to new folks who join us here) And as we do, we certainly won't pray for your souls.

To evangelize is tell the world, our neighbors, our friends, that God is still speaking. To evangelize is to share that the letters UCC starts with "U Can Come" and means so much more as well.

Share the good news. Amen.