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What is Evangelism?

John 15:1-12

Acts 8:26-38

The word “evangelism” has taken a beating in the last 15-20 years. It is a word that is more likely associated with TV evangelists who promise to send you a prayer scarf that will heal your diseases and fix your credit for a donation of \$19.99, than it is with thoughtful, heart-felt faith. And even churches that didn’t have a preacher with big hair and a “God-like” voice, used to know what evangelism was. Evangelism used to mean inviting people to come to your church for worship. So, I remember going to church with one of my middle-school friends to her Baptist Church in the 1970’s and she had an offering envelope with her that had on it four boxes that she was to check:

- Did you bring your Bible?
- Did you come to worship?
- Did you bring your Offering?
- Did you bring a friend?

And I remember realizing that I was “the friend” that allowed her to check that box. In the past, we could designate a Sunday as “invite a friend” day and then have 25-35 new folks brought to worship. And back in the day, one of the first questions that you asked someone who was new to town was “Where do you go to church?” (I realize that memory marks me as “old”).

Things have changed. Evangelism is not a word that we use all that much, nor is there consensus about what it means or how to do it. But the literal meaning of the original Greek and Latin roots means “to bring good news” or to “preach the gospel.”

And that is exactly what is happening in the passage from The Acts of the Apostles’ that we read this morning. The Book of Acts records the events that transpired after Jesus was crucified and buried and after they realized that he was no longer in the tomb. Basically what Acts records is this explosion of people who could not contain themselves and who began to tell everyone they knew – and some people that they didn’t know - about Jesus and about who they were realizing that he was. So we get this story of Philip who responds to a prompting that he understands comes from God. “Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” And the oldest manuscripts add, “This is a wilderness road.” In other words, God’s Spirit didn’t say – go hang out in Forest Acres town square. There was not

another reason to go to the wilderness road, except that God told Philip to go. And he comes across a high-ranking official in the court of the Queen of Ethiopia – her Chief Financial Officer it turns out – who was returning to his work after worshipping God in Jerusalem. In other words, the CFO from Ethiopia was seeking God and was open to worshipping God and felt that the Jews had some truth that he wanted to know more about. And Philip overhears him reading from the Scroll of Isaiah and engages this Ethiopian CFO in conversation. “Do you understand what you are reading? To which the distinguished traveler says, “No. Can you explain it?” And the rest is history. Philip responds to the traveler’s questions and connects the dots straight from Isaiah to Jesus. And the Ethiopian responds to Philip’s telling of the story by asking to be baptized.

The absolute and sheer shock of the baptism of this Ethiopian Official by Philip is hard for us to see or hear. Think for a moment about the context. Jesus was a Jew and had called all of his loyal disciples from among his people. And the history out of which Jesus came – the very scriptures that he memorized – said that God had chosen the Jews from among all the peoples of the earth to bless. Not the Ethiopians, Not the Greeks, Not anyone else – The Jews. If salvation was to be had, it would come to the Jews and then – maybe – it could be shared.

But what Jesus’s death and resurrection does is blow the top and sides off of that intellectual construct and historical box. Philip – a lowly Jewish follower of a now dead and disgraced radical Rabbi – baptizes a non-Jew, and not only a non-Jew an Ethiopian eunuch who served a foreign government at a very high level! Say What!?! The early disciples of Jesus had to decide whether Philip had lost his mind and gone off the reservation, or if it was indeed a command from God telling them that the news of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection was good news for the whole world. The fact that this story is in our Scriptures is our answer.

The news of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection is truth and good news unlike any truth and good news that has ever or will ever be. It changes how we see the world, how we see truth, how we see ourselves and how we see even Ethiopian CFO’s.

A member of this congregation, John Allison, gave me an article from The Wall Street Journal that was published on Easter Sunday called “The Easter Effect” (WSJ March 31-April1, 2018 – C1). In it the author, George Weigel, [a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center] talks about the explosive growth of the Christian Gospel and chronicles the conversion of Constantine and the establishment of Christianity as the religion of the State. Weigel asks the question, “How did a ragtag band of nobodies from the far edges of the Mediterranean world become such a dominant force in just two and a half centuries?” And he summarizes other’s work to give the answer. “Christianity modeled a nobler way of life than what was on offer elsewhere in the rather brutal society of the day. In Christianity, women were respected as they weren’t in classical culture, and played a critical role in bringing men to the faith and attracting converts. In an age of plagues, the readiness of Christians to care for all the sick, not just their own, was a factor, as was the impressive witness to faith of countless martyrs.” The whole article is worth reading.

Essentially, Evangelism was not and perhaps should never have been a program or a plan or a gimmick. The early Gospel was told because it changed lives and so attracted attention and generated gratitude. Evangelism was the bringing of good news to bad news and the witnessing of those whose lives had been changed in answer to questions from their friends who said, “What has happened to you? What changed you?”

Maybe Evangelism got such a bad rap in the American Church precisely because it moved from “Let me tell you how I have been changed by my love for God and by following Jesus!” to “Let me tell you how you need to change to look more like I think you should look so that God will love you!”

What is Evangelism?

1. I think that first it is a willingness to ask questions that reveals our humility and that grow out of a seeking for the truth – not just for fact that serve our own biases. What is really true? What sort of reality – what sort of God - makes sense out of life and suffering and death?
2. Self-Evaluation and Repentance. For Good News to be brought to Bad News we have to be real about whether or not our lives have been changed by following Jesus. And we have to admit all of the places where we have either behaved so badly that we keep people from seeing God in us, or where we have pointed to ourselves rather than to God as the source of truth. All of us have failed to love as God loves. All of us have hurt others – either by what we have done or by what we have not done. All of us must decide whether or not we will try again today to model what it means to abide in God’s love and to love one another as God loves us. Have we been changed? Are we credible examples of what it looks like to love? And if not – maybe we are not those who can bring good news to bad. We don’t have to be perfect – we are human. But, we must be credible to be Evangelists.
3. And those who love as Christ loved us are those who will be moved and able to bring good news to places where there is confusion and hurt and suffering. So, those of us who claim to be Disciples of Jesus have to be ready to respond when God says, “Get up and go down to that part of town where nobody wants to go. I have a job for you there.”

If we are not willing to seek the truth – even if it conflicts with what we want to believe.

And if we are not willing to take a relentless self-inventory and choose to love as Christ loved us.

And if we are not willing to go where God tells us to go, Then we need to stop saying that we are a Good News People, and stop saying that the Church is shrinking because of bad preaching, hypocritical members or political divisions.

To be evangelists, we must first be so convinced of God’s love for us that we cannot – simply cannot – continue life as normal. To be evangelists we must first be rooted in the true vine –

Jesus Christ – so that we will have true life. And the way we know that we are rooted in the true vine is that what grows from us and our work is the fruit of love.

Jesus commanded us: This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

That is Evangelism.