

**Sermon**  
**Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene**  
**Sunday, October 9, 2022**  
**10am**

Text: Acts 18:1-8 (NRSVUE)

[prayer]

Today let's talk about the 'E' word: Evangelism.

If that word makes you uncomfortable, that is okay; it does me, too.

The word evangelism comes from the Greek *euangelion*, which simply means 'good news.' To evangelize means to share the Good News of Jesus. But for a lot of reasons too complicated to expound here, evangelism has ceased to feel like a good and joyful thing for many Christians. The word conjures various church recruitment tactics ranging from irritating to harmful.

I had to take an evangelism class in seminary. I say 'had to' because the class was a requirement for ordination. Like many of my millennial peers, the word 'evangelism' evoked a lot of negative feelings. No one was especially excited to take that course, and our professor knew it. It was his job to set the record straight for us on what evangelism is and is not.

Evangelism *is* an invitation to receive the Good News of Jesus Christ. It *is not* coercion. A true evangelist accepts that people always have the freedom to refuse the invitation to know Jesus.

Evangelism *is* sharing our witness and testimony of who God is. It *is not* proselytism. To proselytize is to use power to impose our beliefs on another person to convert them. A true evangelist understands that a person is converted only through the power of God.

Above all, evangelism is *discipleship*. It is the work of making disciples, which is the mission of all Christians. There is no practical difference between evangelism

and discipleship. And how do we make disciples? Through the practical demonstration of God's love in our lives and the world.

Since the days of the Roman Emperor Constantine, the Church has been prone to confusing evangelism and proselytism. Too often we endeavor to use power and policies to impose Christian belief on our neighbors. This is what disturbs me most about the resurgence of Christian nationalism in our political discourse – as if we can save ourselves from declining numbers and influence by Christianizing the country. Should we pray for spiritual revival in the Church? Yes, we should, but the proof of revival is not found in how 'Christian' our country is. God's kingdom will not come to pass through force or legislation. God's kingdom will come through the peaceful conversion of our hearts to the Way of Jesus.

It is slow work, this work of conversion, and we are prone to being impatient. But there are no shortcuts to the kingdom of God. Jesus made that very clear when he chose a slow and agonizing death on a cross as the symbol of our conversion. He had power over heaven's legions, but he did not use that power to establish his kingdom. His eyes were on the long game: "Thy kingdom come; thy will be done *on earth as it is in heaven.*" The kingdom of God is not achieved through compulsion; it is achieved through the witness of heaven, which is self-giving love. And you cannot force love.

The Apostle Paul understood this in his bones. His conversion was absolutely a conversion of love. Here was a man who was a zealot and a persecutor of Christians. He hunted them down, turned them in to the religious authorities, watched them be put to death. But one day he met Jesus. The encounter left him temporarily blind. And it was through the witness of a Christian, Ananias, who cared for Paul in his time of need, that Paul was converted to Christianity. He stopped persecuting Christians and became our greatest evangelist.

There is much to learn from the ways that Paul practiced evangelism. We often equate evangelism with preaching. Some of you may have personally experienced one of the late Rev. Billy Graham's crusades for Christ. These were evangelistic campaigns Graham led between 1947 and 2005. He traveled all over the world, preaching to great crowds of people. His crusades helped define the practice of evangelism in the last century. Like Graham, Paul did a lot of preaching. But he also shared the Good News of Jesus another way: Through his daily work.

Paul was a tentmaker by trade. In his earliest missionary journeys, he used his ability to make tents for a very practical reason: To support himself and pay his way from city to city. But he also used tentmaking as a tool of evangelism. His trade occupied him most of the day, meaning he spent more time making tents than preaching or teaching in the Jewish synagogues and Greek *agoras*. Paul lived and worked among the very people he hoped to share the good news of Jesus with. This everyday job of making tents was also a faithful witness to the Gospel. It was indicative of an ethic that is true of both Jews and Christians: We believe that our lives have been redeemed by and belong to God. We are called to use the whole of our lives to serve God and our neighbors.

While in Corinth, Paul shared the work of tentmaking with a Jewish couple from Rome, Priscilla and Aquila. They had been converted to the Way of Jesus and then expelled from Rome for their beliefs. Together, the three of them created a Christian fellowship in their tentmaking shop. Imagine all the people who visited that shop and interacted with them. Imagine what those people learned of Christ while they were there. The honor with which they were received; the humble and honest labor they witnessed; the friendly and cheerful way Paul, Priscilla, and Aquila conducted their business – these things demonstrated the character of Christ. And the character of Christ converts just as much – perhaps even more – than the words of Christ.

“Preach the gospel at all times and if necessary, use words.”<sup>1</sup> The most powerful sermon is the way we live our lives. Do our lives reflect the character of Jesus? Last week we learned that the way the early church gathered in community was a powerful form of witness. The way that Christians conducted their daily lives in the communities where they lived was also a form of witness. And it still is!

We may ask ourselves, “Does my life really make a difference?” But when we go about our daily lives, inviting God to grace even our most mundane tasks with the power of the Holy Spirit, the world comes to know something of Jesus through our character. And when each of us is doing that *together*, consider how much more Jesus is made known and glorified! In an increasingly polarized and self-centered society, one of the best witnesses we can offer as Christians right now is how to live and work together in harmony.

---

<sup>1</sup> Anonymous quote popularly attributed to St. Francis of Assisi.

Yes, the ‘E’ word may make us uncomfortable and for good reason. Perhaps we have been hurt by someone else’s attempts at evangelism. Perhaps we think we are not eloquent enough or lack the skill to share the Gospel. Perhaps we do not think we have anything worth sharing. But we must never underestimate the power of our witness. Each of us has gifts to share. Those gifts can be Good News to our neighbors. And we do not share our gifts, our witness, alone. Our witness is amplified when we share it together. “Two are better than one because they have a good return for their toil” (Eccl 4:9). Just like Paul, Priscilla, and Aquila sharing their gift of tentmaking together, when we share our gifts in community, when we work together to serve and bless our neighbors, our witness is strengthened.

We should use our gifts in practical ways together, even when our gifts do not seem ‘spiritual.’ The past few weeks I have been combining my gift of administration with our sister Sherry’s gift for finance to draft next year’s church budget. It is a lot of number crunching, and the work does not *feel* spiritual, but I know that a strong church budget is part of the foundation for effective ministry. In the end, every gift is spiritual because every gift comes from God and can be used by God to build God’s kingdom. This is what evangelism is: Allowing God to use our lives, individually and together, to share the Good News of Jesus.

Still, perhaps the main reason that the ‘E’ word makes us uncomfortable is we are afraid of rejection. Recall that evangelism is an invitation that can always be refused. Not everyone will appreciate the Good News that our lives reflect. Paul knew this in his bones, too. He was a devoted Jew. He loved his people and wanted them to experience the joy and freedom he had found in Christ. But he experienced a lot of rejection from his Jewish siblings. In our Scripture lesson, Paul first attempts to evangelize the Jews of Corinth...until they turn against him. He is forced to leave them and move on to the Greeks. His words for his Jewish siblings sound harsh: “Your blood be on your heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the gentiles” (v. 6). But I do not think Paul’s words were a curse; I think they are words that came from a place of deep anguish. Paul was deeply saddened that some of his Jewish siblings would not receive the Good News of Jesus. The witness of his conversion – the witness of his life – was not enough to turn their hearts. What grief he must have felt.

Grief makes us want to clench our fists, try to control the outcome. But Paul does the opposite. He lets go. He lets go of those who will not listen and releases them

to God. He moves on. And when he does, he finds different, fertile ground for the Good News. He settles in the house of a Gentile named Titius Justus and together they start a house church where many Corinthians come to know Jesus, including the leader of the Jewish synagogue next door.

We must not fear rejection; the Good News of Jesus is meant to be shared! When our witness is refused, we respond with grace. It is true that evangelism can feel overwhelming, maybe even futile, in a culture that is less and less interested in what Christians have to say. But the answer is not to force our beliefs on others. The Good News stops being Good News when we seek to control what is not ours to control. We hold the invitation to know Jesus lightly, and we let our gifts, our lives, our life *together* as a church family, speak freely for themselves. We can give thanks that evangelism is not work we do alone; happily, we share this work with others. Our gifts are meant to complement each other, and the witness of each of our lives is amplified when combined with the lives of others. *Preach the gospel together at all times and if necessary, use words.* May that be an encouraging word for your week, friends.

Amen.