

Evangelism: A Dirty Word

To many, especially in recent years, “evangelism” is considered a dirty word. We talk about it in church sometimes, but we’re hesitant to do it. And outside of the church, well, don’t bring it up. And why? Well, it has not always been done in the best ways, nor has it always been received well. For some of us, the thought of evangelism conjures up images of Benny Hinn’s healing services or street corner preachers calling down fire and hell on people passing by. Some of us might think of the various tracts that we’ve received over the years containing things like the “Four Spiritual Laws.” I remember a friend of mine in college telling me how he had waited on this large table of church people on a Sunday afternoon after church, and at the end of the meal he saw what he thought was a 20 dollar bill sitting there as his tip. It turns out, it was a tract talking about how heaven is better than money. But it was made to look just like cash, I guess to trick people into picking it up. Depending on your background, some of you may have been burned by friends in the past who tried to share their faith with you through force or with judgment.

Mennonites in particular have had a scattered history with evangelism. The Anabaptist movement started during the Reformation by a group of “Radicals” who thought that the protestant reformers didn’t go far enough in breaking away from the Catholic Church. They believed that the only valid form of baptism was adult baptism and that they shouldn’t blend their faith with the state, and so they began baptizing one another and spreading their message to those around them. Their movement spread like wildfire, but it wasn’t without consequences. You see they were opposing the Catholic and Protestant church and all state authorities, basically making sure that everyone hated them. And

because their message was against everything that everyone else stood for, they were viewed as rebellious and dangerous, a group that needed to be stamped out. Many were martyred, or killed for their beliefs, which only helped strengthen the faith of their followers and added to their number. But as time went on and they continued to suffer at the hands of their persecutors, they began to share their faith through actions rather than words. When the Anabaptists moved to America and their separation from the world was no longer defined by persecution, they chose to exercise their separateness through living their lives in humility. Mennonites became known as the “quiet in the land.” They were admired for what they stood for, and for better or worse, began to develop their faith within their own communities. They focused substantially on service and missions and saw that as their way to witness to those around them. Unfortunately, as time has progressed, numbers in the Mennonite church have been declining because there was not an intentional focus on verbal evangelism. And the “fiery” evangelism that we think of has turned many people off from hearing about Christianity.

And so today, we are going to explore what evangelism is supposed to look like and why it is important.

This summer, we spent time together developing our mission and vision as a church; where are we and where do we want to go in the future. What is it that God has called us to? We are going to spend the next couple of Sundays exploring various parts of that visioning project, but today specifically we are going to talk about the first part of our vision statement, which is **“Sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ with our neighbors and friends.”** In order to understand what that statement means to us as a church and how we are supposed to work it out, we

are going to break it down into three sections: what, who, and how. What is the Good News of Jesus Christ, who are our neighbors and friends, and how does the Good News get shared?

First we're going to look at the "what."

1) What is the Good News of Jesus Christ?

Here's an interesting tidbit for you. The word Evangelism is a transliteration, or a literal translation of a word from another language, of the Greek word "euangelion" which means "Good News." So "evangelize" is to give or spread the "Good News" of Christ; this is the center of our conversation. It makes sense, then, that the first thing that we need to do is figure out just exactly what this "good news" is. And I believe that there is no one more qualified to explain this than Jesus Christ himself. One of the most well known verses in the New Testament is John 3:16, which gives a fairly straightforward explanation of the Good News.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life."

Here's the reality of the world. God perfectly holy, He created man in his image to love and worship Him. However, He didn't want to force us to love Him, so He gave us the right to choose and direct our own lives. So we, in our infinite wisdom, decided to do things to violate his holiness, we call these things sin. Because God is so holy he cannot be near sin, so he could not be near us in our sinful state. The consequence for sin is death and so the only way that we could bridge the separation from God is through the sacrifice of something. In the Old Testament, they did this by sacrificing the best of their animals, but

this was only a temporary fix, a band-aid on the greater problem. God knew that this solution was inadequate, and it only really applied to the Israelites. He wanted the whole world to have a chance to return to him, so He sent His son Jesus Christ to be that sacrifice for us, to die in our place and therefore bridge the gap between us and Him. This is grace, that even though we don't deserve life and love, God has given it to us. And John tells us that all we have to do to receive this grace is believe in Him. This idea of the "good news" is talked about all over the New Testament.

In Romans 10:9-13, Paul gives us a little more about how we can receive this Good News and who it is meant for.

⁹ If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. ¹¹ As Scripture says, "Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame." ¹² For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, ¹³ for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

If we can believe in our heart of hearts that Jesus did what he said he would do, died and raised from the dead, something impossible for man but completely possible for God, and if we can confess that Jesus is the Lord of our lives, that He is in control, then we can be saved from our death-deserving sinfulness. And this is for everyone, not the elite, not the special, everyone.

Transition: Now that we understand the "what", let's look at the "who."

2) Who are our neighbors and friends?

In Matthew 22:37-40, Jesus sums up the two most important commandments from the Old Testament.

³⁷ Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

The second most important commandment for Christians to follow is that we are to “love our neighbors as ourselves.” If this is so important, then I think that we need to figure out who our neighbor is. In Matthew 10:25-37, Jesus again gives the two greatest commandments, concluding with, “love you neighbor as yourself.” The teacher of the law who was talking with Jesus then asks, “Who is my neighbor?” As per usual, Jesus answers in the form of a parable. If I had been following Jesus around at the time, I would be so frustrated with this approach. Why not just give a straight answer? It would be so much easier. And yet, Jesus wanted his followers to discover and really understand what he was talking about rather than to just be fed answers.

And so he tells what is now referred to as the “Parable of the Good Samaritan.” In it, a man was walking through a dangerous area by himself was beaten up and robbed. Laying there, bleeding and dying, a priest and Levite pass by at separate times. Instead of helping the person, they passed on the other side of the road, making excuses for their behavior. Finally, a Samaritan passed by the beaten person. Now, you have to understand that the Israelites and Samaritans have a pretty

rough history. Both started out as being part of the people of God, but along the way the Samaritans broke away and began practicing things that weren't acceptable to their fellow Hebrews. And so they became outcasts, despised by the rest of society. This Samaritan, the lowest of lows, who had no reason to help this man, brought him to an inn where he could be taken care of, paid for his medical bills, and came back and checked in on him. After telling this parable, Jesus asks the teacher, "which one of these men is the neighbor?" If Jesus had simply told him the answer, the teacher would never have been able to accept it. Surely, with two of the religious elites in the mix, it wouldn't be the dirty Samaritan. And yet, upon understanding the story, the teacher was able to understand that a neighbor is not based on credentials or whether you like them or not. And so he replied, "the one who had mercy."

So, as a church at Oak Grove, who are the friends and neighbors that we should be sharing the Good News with? Everyone. The person serving us lunch at the LGP, our doctor, our neighbors, people we like and people we don't like.

Transition: So, we see that the Good News is the free gift of eternal life found in God and that it is available to everyone. Lastly then, we are going to look at the "how."

3) How does the Good News get shared?

Jesus tells his disciples in Matthew 9:37-38 that, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." The world is full of people ready to receive and believe in the Good News of Christ. But there aren't enough harvesters. Now, for those farmers out there,

what happens when you don't harvest crops when they are ripe? They rot. There is a whole world of people missing out on the Good News because we as Christians aren't doing our job.

In Romans 10:14-15, Paul writes,

¹⁴ How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? ¹⁵ And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

Paul breaks it down in a pretty straightforward way for us here. There's this Good News that you can be saved from all of the junk of this life, all you have to do to receive it is call on Jesus, but how can you call on Him if you don't believe, and how can you believe if you have not heard who He is or what He is about, and how are you supposed to hear if no one is telling you about it?

What's the answer to this dilemma then? We have to be sharing the Good News with people: Evangelism.

After Jesus came back from the dead and before he ascended into heaven, he came to His disciples and gave them what is often called the Great Commission; he charged them with this task while he was gone. Matthew 28:18-20 reads,

¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have

commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

It was their duty as Christ followers to go to the whole earth and bring the Good News to all people, making them into disciples or followers of Jesus. And this commission has been passed down to us. This is our purpose in life as Christians.

So What? What does a life of true evangelism look like?

In the main passage read today, we see Paul writing to the church in Thessalonica, excited and blessed by all of the work that they've been doing. You see, Thessalonica was Paul's first visit into Europe, and it was sort of a proving ground for how the Good News was going to be received in that region. It was a large city, part of Alexander's empire, and served as a way station between the eastern and western parts of what we now know as Europe. Some suggest that Paul took some of his cues and vision from Alexander; in the same way that Alexander took over this city and region for the sake of creating one unified empire and world, Paul was working through this city to bring the Good News of Christ to the world. Paul was worried, however. He had only been able to spend three short weeks in this city and was concerned that the message he gave to these new believers would not stick. But before he could even check in with the Thessalonians to see about their progress, Paul heard reports from other people that the Thessalonians were witnessing to who had received the gospel! Paul was seeing the multiplication of the Good News, from him, to the Thessalonians, to the entire world. They knew that they could not just keep this good news to themselves; they had to share it with those around them. They took up the torch of evangelism. This was the start of the church!

Today, we stand as descendants of Paul's evangelism, and we have the same burden to bring the Good News to the world. But like we talked about earlier, "evangelism" has often been seen as a dirty word amongst Mennonites and in our society. So, how do we change the paradigm of evangelism while still fulfilling our calling? Well, there is no doubt that there is a harvest out there, and we are the harvesters. We have to stop creating excuses and start stepping up. But I would give a few words of advice toward doing this without turning people off.

First, *you have to care about the person*. The reason that we share the Good News is because we love people. God loved us so much that He was willing to save us; now we are charged to have that same love for other people share salvation with them. If you do not care about the person, then it won't matter what you say to them. And if you do not care, then you need to seriously rethink your own faith.

Second, *your sharing has to be genuine*. You have to share from a heart of sincerity; again this couples along with love. If you are simply trying to do a duty and get it over with, or if you are only interested in filling church pews, people will know it. And nobody is going to respond to an insincere Gospel.

Finally, *you have to follow up*. Jesus tells us in Matthew to make disciples. There is a difference between making converts and disciples. Discipleship is the process of deepening our faith. As Christians we need to be willing to walk alongside of our brothers and sisters to help them move forward.

May we be challenged by the call to evangelism, and see it not as a dirty word but as a life-giving word.

