

The Dreaded E Word – Evangelism
The Primary Purpose of Mission – IV
March 12, 2017

Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved.² For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge.³ Since they did not know the righteousness of God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness.⁴ Christ is the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.

⁵ Moses writes this about the righteousness that is by the law: "The person who does these things will live by them." ⁶ But the righteousness that is by faith says: "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down) ⁷ "or 'Who will descend into the deep?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).⁸ But what does it say? "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the message concerning faith that we proclaim.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."

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!" Romans 10:1-15 (NIV)

This morning is our 4th and final message looking at the fundamental pillar of the church of being missional. We started out with the idea that mission is all about being sent. God calls a people to himself and then he sends them out to fulfill his purpose and mission in the world. God is both a calling God and a sending God. The next Sunday we looked at what it means to be missional in our own community. Last Sunday we were fortunate to have James Krabill with us, from Mennonite Mission Network, to talk about God's calling of being missional "to the ends of the earth." This morning we are concluding the purpose of mission by looking at *The Dreaded E Word – Evangelism*.

In the book of Ephesians the apostle Paul gives us what some today believe to be the core grouping of spiritual gifts which God gives believers:

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists and some to be pastors and teachers. Ephesians 4:11 (NIV)

Of those five none of us are called and gifted to do all of them, or even more than one or two. But as Christians, there is one of those that we are all called to do at different times and in different ways, even if it is not our gifting. And that is the dreaded E-word, "Evangelism."

Evangelism –

¹"The winning or revival of personal commitments to Christ."

²"Militant or crusading zeal."

Merriam-Webster Dictionary

Unfortunately that definition of evangelism is not really that helpful and that second part, “militant or crusading zeal,” has often been even harmful, detrimental for the cause of Christ in the world. The definition from the Evangelical Dictionary of Theology is much more helpful.

“The proclamation of the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ with a view to bringing about the reconciliation of the sinner to God the Father through the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit. . .

Evangelism is based on the initiative of God himself. Because God acted, believers have a message to share with others.”

Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, Walter Elwell, editor

With a title like the Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, you would expect it to have a fairly extensive definition regarding evangelism. And it does, about two pages of pretty small print.

I do have a confession to make this morning. I went to the Mennonite Encyclopedia in the library here at church. A five volume set of pretty much everything having to do with Mennonite history. And I went there expecting that I would find nothing on evangelism, because that just doesn’t seem to be one of our strengths, especially in our most recent history. I was quite surprised. I found five pages of small print defining Evangelism and the role it has played in Mennonite history.

The Mennonite Encyclopedia defines evangelism as “the spreading of the gospel, the outreach of the Christian church to win unbelievers.” It goes on to point out that all of the original Anabaptists, including Mennonites, were intensely evangelistic. Their only hope of expansion and growth was by evangelism. But there was an even more important reason that made them intensely evangelistic. That reason was their acceptance of the Great Commission of Jesus Christ, their Savior & Lord, as their primary purpose for existing. They took literally the Great Commission at their primary purpose:

“Therefore go and make disciples of all peoples, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded.”
Matthew 28:19-20 (NIV)

A 20th century Christian historian by the name of Kenneth Latourette, went so far to say that the Anabaptists were the only group during the Reformation period to try and carry out the Great Commission of Christ as their action plan.

Menno Simons, the founder of the Mennonite Church is considered to have been one of the great evangelists during that time period. Another Anabaptist in that time period by the name of Leenaert Bouwens (d. 1582) had in his diary the names of 10,378 individuals whom he baptized. The early Mennonites and Anabaptists believed so strongly in evangelism and the Great Commission that they were willing to be persecuted, tortured and even executed to carry it out.

But over the years the persecutors gained the upper hand and won out. Through countless imprisonments and executions (of both men and women), their evangelistic fervor died. Those who were once flaming evangelists became “the quiet in the land.” They were happy to be permitted just to exist. In some areas the Mennonites and Anabaptists were permitted to settle

only under certain conditions: 1) They could not proselytize or evangelize their neighbors; 2) They could not have services that were open to the public; and 3) They could not have a church building. Historian Latourette points out that by the mid 17th century, just a little over 100 years after its inception, the spirit of evangelism was completely extinguished in all Mennonite groups. Which probably points out why we have struggled so much with evangelism ever since.

Even those that immigrated to America brought with them the idea of being “the quiet in the land,” happy to just find freedom and peace. They devoted themselves to finding communities to settle in, to buying land to farm, to building homes, and establishing Mennonite congregations that were made up of only traditional Mennonite family units.// Other than small numbers and pockets of individuals who sprouted up at different times challenging the church to reach out and be more evangelistic, the Mennonite church in America remained pretty insular. And it was able to survive throughout most of the 20th century, especially the first half of the 20th century, because most had large families that stayed in their church communities. Times have changed. Today, most Mennonites are not having large families and most are not staying in the communities they are born in and raised. That’s the bad news. The Good News is that the way the Mennonite church did church in the 20th century is not the way God designed church to be. Jesus says in the Gospel of John

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” John 3:16

Jesus’ parting words to his disciples as recorded in the Gospel of Mark,

“Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved.” Mark 16:15-16a (NIV)

And Jesus’ last words as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew:

“Therefore go and make disciples of all peoples, Matthew 28:19 (NIV)

But we can’t make disciples until we first share the Good News and invite people into the Christian faith community. John the Baptist, Jesus, and the early church all agreed that entrance into the Christian faith community begins with repentance and belief: the acknowledgment of our own sinful condition, the agreeing to turn from that sin, and believing in Jesus Christ and what he did for us on the cross as the only source of our salvation.

The apostle Paul tells us in our Scripture passage this morning,

this is the message concerning faith that we proclaim.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.
Romans 15:8b-9 (NIV)

Not only do we need to believe in Jesus, and not just believe that Jesus was a great guy, a great moral teacher, a great prophet. Many have believed that in the 2,000 years since he appeared on

earth. We need to believe that he was and is the Son of God, that he came to earth, lived a sinless life here on earth, and died on the cross for the forgiveness of sins. And not just that he died on the cross but that God raised him from the dead. Belief in Jesus is not easy, or as simple as we think it is.

And Paul tells us we need to do even more than believe. We need to declare with our mouth that Jesus is Lord. And it's not even just declaring with your mouth that Jesus is Lord. What are you going to do with Jesus as your Lord? Because Jesus said it is not enough to declare with your mouth that he is Lord. At the end of his *Sermon on the Mount*, his longest teaching session recorded in Scripture, Jesus says,

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." Matthew 7:21 (NIV)

So, what really is the gospel message, the Good News, which we are called to proclaim?

That God created the world and everything in it. That he created mankind, humans, both male and female in His image. In His image meaning that He created us good. But something happened shortly after creating us and that was the sin of Adam and Eve and the subsequent fall. Ever since the fall there has been no way that we could get back to God on our own. There is just too much sin in each of us. The Old Testament is the story of God trying to get us back to him, through our efforts. And it ends in futility. Futility meaning it's useless. We can't do it. That's the Bad News! Enter the Good News!! God knew we were not going to be able to do it on our own.

So the story culminates with God taking matters into His own hands. He sends His Son to earth in human form. Jesus humbles himself and comes to earth in human form. And he lives a perfect and sinless life but the people reject him. It says in the Bible that the people whom he came to save rejected him and for the most part we think that was the Jews, but Jesus came for everyone and we all rejected him at some point. So they put him on the cross to die because very few could accept the claims that he was making – that he was God, that he was going to die, but that he was also going to be raised again, to offer new life, new eternal life. And for who? For all who repent from their own sinfulness, their own ability to save themselves, confess with their mouths that Jesus is Lord, and believe in their heart that Jesus is everything that he said he was, and that God raised him from the dead. And it's not just about eternal life in the future, eternal life begins right here and now. Our Scripture from last Sunday:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!
2 Corinthians 5:17-21 (NIV)

So, if all this is Good News, why do we have so much trouble proclaiming it? I think there are a few reasons:

1. Our history as Mennonites and Anabaptists – how we went from a church with so much evangelistic fervor and zeal that our founders were willing to even give up their lives to share the Good News, to baptize new believers, and to make disciples, and many of them did give up their lives, thousands of them – to “the quite in the land.”

2. We became comfortable. Comfortable to live a life with a nice piece of property, a nice home, being able to raise a family and being able to worship and live with those who are most like us. Living as Christians in the United States has just compounded it. Living as Christians in the United States, where we very rarely suffer persecution, allows us to be comfortable. Unfortunately, throughout the church's history, it has grown the most, not when it's been comfortable, but when it has suffered persecution.
3. We have become like our pluralistic culture. So much so I'm not really sure many of us believe the claims that Jesus made –

Claims like he is “the [only] way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through him” (John 14:6)

And that if what he said about those who believe in him, that they will not perish but have eternal life, than the opposite is true as well. Those who do not repent, believe in him, and confess Him as Lord, will perish and not have eternal life. And he didn't just leave it for us to assume that, he actually told us that but we often skip over that.

We like John 3:16-17 while ignoring John 3:18-20:

¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.¹⁹ This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed.

I picked up a book last Sunday by James Krabill entitled “Is it insensitive to share your faith: Hard questions about Christian mission in a plural world.” The answer is yes, there are times when it is insensitive to share our faith (especially in the way we do it). But there are even more times when it is insensitive not to share our faith!

If you knew somebody was dying or was going to do something that was going to result in their death, but you could do something to stop it from happening, wouldn't you do whatever you needed to do to stop it? Well, the truth is everybody here on earth is going to die. Someone among us had a co-worker who was killed on his way to work last Monday morning. This past Friday I received word that someone I used to work with died almost instantaneously from a stroke. Fine and perfectly healthy one day, gone from this life the next. What Jesus offers, besides new life here during our time left on earth, is life forever. The alternative is death with no hope, a Christ-less eternity, but for the most part we seem to be pretty comfortable just sitting by and watching.

As Christians, we have two primary callings upon our lives: 1) to preach, or to proclaim the Good News to all creation; and 2) to make disciples of Jesus. All else is less.

I think one of the other primary reasons we do not do Evangelism, other than we ourselves have a difficult time accepting the very challenging claims of Jesus – especially in a post-Christian, pluralistic world – is that we try and take too much responsibility for the results.

Only God saves, we don't. He just uses us as His instruments in the time period and the world in which he has placed us. God gives human beings the choice to repent and accept the gift of His Son, or not. If God gives people the choice, then we need to.

What if we accepted the fact that God is primary one responsible and that He is already working in people's lives? John Wesley developed a concept hundreds of years ago that many have a hard time with today – "Prevenient Grace." "Prevenient Grace" is the understanding that God prepares (prevenes) the hearts of people and attunes them to their need for salvation. Jesus said over and over again that he does only what he sees the Father doing (John 5:19-20; 6:38; 9:4; 12:49-50, etc.).

What would happen if when we got up every morning, before starting our day, we made the conscious decision to see where God might be already at work in people's lives (in the good, the bad and the ugly) and how he might want to use us in helping those people see where God is at work and how He might be leading them to Jesus? And I'm pretty sure that if we're doing it like Jesus, it's not with militant and crusading zeal. I'm pretty sure that if we're doing it like Jesus did, then we're doing it the same way we are told by Jesus' foremost disciple Peter – after Jesus' death, resurrection and the sending of the Holy Spirit upon Peter:

In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.

1 Peter 3:15 (NIV)