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Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



SERMON October 16— “Evangelism: Personal and Purposeful” Luke 8:33-39, John 19:33-37

This week we continue our series on evangelism. So far we’ve considered the following just to recap:

Becoming a new creation is foundational to both our personal faith as well as having an urgency for evangelism. In our faith, while our works don’t earn our salvation, they are the evidence of if we’ve been saved. The ongoing journey to become more and more like Christ is what helps us exemplify Him to the world and we hope inspire others to a similar faith. If we believe our transformation is through the power of God, not ourselves, we also believe everyone has the potential to become a new creation. If this is the case and we know God desires that “none should perish”, then we know it is our common call to fulfill the Great Commission by “going into all the world.”

We considered the roots of the fear many have about evangelism. Often it’s rooted in the mistaken understanding that evangelism is pigeon holed into street preaching and striking up cold conversations with strangers, not knowing where we should start, and feeling like those who are strikingly different from us are unreachable by us. In truth the mission field is everywhere around us, everywhere we go so we don’t have to look very hard. By virtue of our individuality, our gifts, passions, interests, and so on we are uniquely and already equipped to build connections with people of like mind. At the same time our differences may make us the perfect ones to go to those unlike us to dispel any false and negative assumptions that are held about Christians. Opportunity is everywhere, the question is simply whether we are looking for it. Then we looked at effective, Biblical evangelism. Paul was our case study as his missionary journeys in Acts paint a grand picture in this regard. What made him effective is that he began ministering in his strengths and where he was comfortable. Conveniently this was the synagogue where religion was already the topic of discussion. But this is where Paul was already wildly prepared, spoke their language, knew their way of doing and being. He started from a position of familiarity and worked from there. This holds for us as well. Find the places where we already know the lay of the land and can intelligently communicate about whatever. This builds authentic relationships on common ground rather than contriving relationship by starting from trying to persuade someone they are wrong and we are right.

Last week our note burning oddly tied well into evangelism. We talked about our facility affording us opportunities to offer multiple points of entry for people who may be uncomfortable with just darkening the door of a church let alone coming to full on worship or Bible study. “Safe” experiences produce comfort and give opportunity to meet people in the congregation to build relationship.

Today we are going to look at the content of our evangelism. What do we say and how. We need to be both purposeful and personal.

Purposeful is all about intentionality and authenticity. It’s about letting faith remain forefront of our hearts and minds throughout the day so we can choose our words and tone carefully when we speak. So often we are on autopilot throughout a given day. What is in front of us occupies the fullness of our attention, and innocently we miss places where we can safely and gently communicate that we are people of faith and hope our example bears out a witness that is congruent with that faith.

The first part of a life that is evangelical is a conscious decision to begin our days with the purpose of living our faith and finding places we can shine it to a world that needs it.

Let’s take some examples how we can reword things to reflect faith.

“I’m grateful that I am gifted with (thus and so) because it’s helped me get work that keeps food on the table”. OR “I’m so thankful God gifted me with the ability to X because it’s helped me get work that keeps food on the table.”

“Man I hope my team kicks the daylights out of the other on Sunday.” “Hm, I’m just praying for a good game where no one gets hurt.”

“I’m glad to have the friends that I do, they are amazing.” OR “I’m glad God helped me open up to these people who are my friends, you wouldn’t believe how they’ve changed my life.”

“I’m so glad I can be happy even in hard times.” OR “You know it’s my faith that really helps me keep a good outlook even when times get tough.”

And whatever other examples you can think of yourself. But here’s the catch, however it comes out, let it be genuinely, authentically YOU. When we try to speak aside and outside of who we are it comes across poorly. Jesus was genuine.

The apostles were genuine. Their ministries and such came from a place of authenticity. Ours must as well.

Intentionality is also being primed to notice opportunity to invite. We get speaking with someone and realize they have an interest that coincides with one of our points of entry. Do we invite them or not? If we’re not intentional, that opportunity slips right by us.

This came up months ago in a different message. You meet someone who is new to the area, or between churches, or unchurched but looking for something to guide and encourage them in their journey. Do we simply engage in chit chat or do we have the presence of mind to invite them to come and be with us? If a mission for the lost isn’t on our mind intentionally, the opportunity easily passes untaken.

There’s one more side to intentionality that we need to keep in mind. In order to invite, we need to know what we can invite to. Do we even know all that our congregation offers in ministry? If someone is feeling lonely do we know when the next game night is if they enjoy cards or dominos or board games. If someone is need community but spends nights crocheting on the couch do we know when stitch one pray two meets? If someone is looking to get more active do we know when volleyball is offered? If a parent is looking for a karate school for their child do we know what martial arts we do here? Do we know that we have a fellowship activity for just about any schedule that also meets a basic need? Once a month we do breakfast, once a month lunch, and once a month a dinner. Do we know what and when fall fun fest or the egg hunt will hold?

We can’t invite to what we don’t know exists. Rebekah puts everything out in so many ways from bulletin to facebook to website to fliers at the post office to weekly updates to updates in snail mail for those who don’t have internet or email. You’d be surprised how often we hear frustration about missing an event because “I didn’t know.” Trust me, it’s not for a lack of communication. If I want to be able to offer the access points I have to be intentional about keeping up on what’s happening in our congregation.

That’s a lot for the purposeful. Now for the personal.

Very frequently people are intimidated by evangelism because they think they can’t articulate the gospel message well enough. There is concern that a question will come that they can’t answer. Fortunately there’s something that only you are an expert on, only you can fully articulate, and no one can argue with you about it. Your testimony.

I would suggest that testimony should precede offering the gospel. If the purpose is to hope to persuade or inspire someone to consider Christ, what makes more sense? Do we ask them to believe something they don’t for a wide variety of reasons?

How does it ring if the best we have to offer in terms of why we believe is “I’ve always believed” or “this is how I was raised”? It rings hollow. The ready counter is “I’ve never believed” and “I was raised not to believe”. Then it’s a matter of source reliability. “My people raised me this way” is the same argument on either side.

The most honest answer to why we believe is to be vulnerable enough to talk about how our faith has impacted our lives. I know for me that there have been too many moments dealing with saddening or raging circumstances that I know what I WANT to do, but when I turn to God there is an inexplicable settling and peace that washes over me allowing me the space to make a better, more correct choice. I know that in dark times reading scripture gave me strength. I know that in practice, I’ve experienced firsthand how living into grace, love, and compassion modeled by Christ is the truly most effective way to speak goodness into another’s life.

What about you? How have you felt God work in your life? How have you felt God work through you? Do we take note of these moments and mark them? We have to. This is our testimony. This is the inarguable story to why we believe. It’s not just blind trust. It’s proven experience.

Consider if you were looking to buy something. Would you just take the salesperson’s word that the product is “good”? Or would you look for evidence that it’s good first? The pricier the object, the more diligence we tend to do proving out its worth. How much more the cost of our soul if it comes to our attention?

Before believing the tree is good, most of us want to see the fruit first.

That fruit is the content of our lives that we’ve shared. It’s also the “why” we believe beyond “I told you to”. It’s our testimony.

What makes it simpler and more natural is when sharing our story is part of an exchange that is based on mutuality. We’re not just interested in sharing our own story. We are also interested in hearing the story of the other.

When Jesus went to the man possessed of demons, he met him here he was at. He asked questions. Granted demons answered, but Jesus engaged the man. When he delivered him, Jesus gave on simple instruction. "Go tell your story". Tell what good God has done for you.

In John, the man bore testimony to the death of Jesus. His story was compelling because it was firsthand experience. His story confirmed fulfillment of prophecy and the identity of Christ. That story wasn't kept to himself. He shared it. There is a grand power in being open to offer what God has done for and through us. As we reflect on our testimony we deepen our connection to God. We deepen our reverence for the lives we've been given. We are preparing something that may change someone else's life now and eternally.

The story you or I share is part of how God speaks into the world around us. We become the instrument and through our story God plays the tune to draw the lost to Him. Our part is to simply listen, connect, and share. The work is done by the Holy Spirit.

We've looked at what intentionality entails, and the most reliable, personal story of faith we can relate. We've acknowledged the power in all of it. No that we've spoken it, heard it, and I hope grasp it there is one more step to take. Do it.

BIBLE STUDY: Acts 26

As we've continued to see previously in Acts, this chapter simply runs on from the last. Working his way up the food chain, Paul moves from trial before Festus to trial before King Agrippa. As Paul is given permission to speak, there's a slight nuance to the King's instruction that Paul speak "for" himself. It's more aptly understood as an invitation for Paul to speak about himself.

This distinction is important. It takes it from a harsh "defend yourself" to a more familiar, congenial "tell me about yourself". Paul's compliments to Agrippa about his clearly knowing of Jewish goings on puts this conversation in a different climate than the one with Festus. Festus was a Roman largely ignorant of Jewish culture. Here Paul acknowledges he is speaking with someone on more even footing with him in the Jewish world. There is a different tone.

In some ways, Paul's assessment of Agrippa may indicate that this conversation might be more pertinent or productive than the ones with Felix and Festus. There is more commonalities between them.

In some ways, I read this as Paul isn't the only one on trial here. Perhaps not in terms of guilt or innocence, but in other areas, Agrippa is on trial before Paul. Paul is always assessing his audience. He isn't concerned for himself. He's ready to die if that's what's next. He also trusts that Rome is his final destination and he isn't there yet which has to provide a certain comfort. That he is at peace with his destiny means he can freely evaluate each circumstance and freely speak as he is led to whomever. No matter how powerful or not. He adjusts his speech as he evaluates his judge.

This isn't the only time these kinds of moments occur. Every now and again someone is being judged and they have the courage to speak according to the one casting judgement as much as to the situation at hand. Perhaps not in court, but in the group home system from time to time I'd witness a staff holding a kid accountable and the kid would address the staff and where they were being unfair more than disliking the consequence. The one being judged responded according to what they had evaluated was the motivation for the judging to begin with.

At this point, dealing with Agrippa who was more Jewish centered in what he represented, Paul's argument comes out much more elaborate and focused on his religious Jewishness. He already knows nothing is coming at him from Rome because no charge has stuck to this point. Here he has a platform before a king to present the gospel.

Paul has been accused of being a "ringleader" of a kind of upstart sect within Judaism. His answer to this is to render his pedigree to someone in authority who will (finally) understand it. If there was ever a representative of the most legitimate of "sects" it is Paul. And it is confirmable by many that he is in fact a Pharisee.

The argument shifts and there is a kind of double speak that Paul will use to make a larger point about Jesus later. The accusation is about his hope. The hope spoken of by the prophets, Promise given to the tribes of Israel. He uses the term hope with "resurrection" being implied. This is their hope. Paul is setting up a reinterpretation of this hope revealed in his own conversion experience.

The idea of resurrection wasn't necessarily foreign to the Jews. The Pharisees believed in it after all. They believed that Israel would be resurrected eternally, likely a hope set aside for them and not the Gentiles. They also believed that the hope of the Messiah was an Israel restored to greatness. A resurrection of sorts from the oppressed diaspora community back to prominence above other peoples.

Setting up his conversion tale, Paul first affirms his steadfast commitment to the very ideals that Agrippa holds as well as other observant Jews. Hope of a restored and resurrected Israel. In fact he defended their purity to the great point of persecuting Christians rabidly and doggedly. If anyone could claim a history of staunch opposition to Christians, it's Paul.

This is an example for all of us where our own baggage and past sins and faults that have been overcome are an asset

rather than a liability. If there is credibility to be had about transformation and a new understanding of faith in light of Christ it's Paul. If anyone can understand the journey from addiction to sobriety, it's the recovered addict. If anyone can understand the journey from great loss and tragedy to acceptance and peace, it's the one who has lost greatly and emerged stronger, peaceful, and even happy.

When we have overcome with the help of God, these are the stories of what God has done for an in us. Our witness is genuine because it is rooted in the humble confession of our brokenness that has been turned around by the power of God. Then comes the turn where Paul speaks of his conversion. It is dramatically portrayed. The idea of "kicking against the goads" communicates that God had been trying to get at Paul for a bit. The goads were sharp prods used to guide livestock. To push against them would be painful. God was already working something in Paul. His encounter with Christ on the road was compelling and life changing. It was also instructive as to what his own future would hold.

There is a little tidbit here about Paul's appointment. He refers to himself not as apostle but servant. The role of the apostle is not lording over, but rather service.

The message then becomes inclusive and we'll see why both Jew and Gentile alike may not be crazy about it. As God says He will protect Paul from both Jew and Gentile there is the foretelling that both groups will come against Paul. In other words, Paul is offering this message of resurrection and redemption not only to one people but to all people. As such, contingents from both Jew and Gentile who are upset will come after Paul. God will watch out for him.

this vision and emphasizing the scope of it is important in Paul's religious defense. The Jews accused Paul of being disobedient to God. By fleshing out this vision, Paul is affirming that by bringing this new understanding that resurrection is available to everyone he is obeying God completely. His own understanding of resurrection and restoration had been mistaken and so now he is sharing his new understanding in hopes of bringing all under the Promise and hope of God through Jesus.

He continues on explaining his ministry and mission. Paul is fulfilling his mission to speak to the most common or the most elevated in power about Christ. In earshot here is a King, a governor, and likely various levels of servants and such. Everyone is getting an earful. The message is summed up very succinctly in "turn to God" and "repent of your deeds". It's a faith and it's a faith the brings about active change in our lives.

Paul cites the prophets as requiring the same throughout history. So all Paul is doing is affirming the prophets, but getting a beating and persecuted for it. Let's state this clearly. The Jews who took Paul by force did so because Paul was being obedient to God.

When Paul cites God's help in all he has done and that the message is for Jew and Gentile alike, Festus erupts in objection. Make no mistake, Paul is very clearly grafting Gentiles into the Promises of the Jews and stating that it occurs through faith in the Messiah.

Why is Festus so upset? The same reason in many ways the Jews who rioted against Paul were. The universal redemption of all was a slap in the face to Jews who thought they were and would be God's only special people. Offering the Promises to Gentiles took away their status and position. It took away their "special". It also took the work of restoring the world out of the hands of the Messiah and placed it in the hands of people through whom the Messiah would work. It meant work!

For the Romans to think that somehow a figure from this second or third class of people who were irritants oftentimes was absurd. The way of the Messiah was counter to so much of their way of thinking, doing, and worshipping. This sense that Christ unites and rules all dishonors Caesar and his authority. It is an example of the expression we've heard before that the "world is turned upside down".

This reaction is sadly all too common today. There is a rage that can foment when the perception is there that what sets us apart, gives us a leg up, or is responsible for our success and well-being is threatened by another person or group. We talk about "those people" or run down that "so and so". Often the tone elevates to anger. What may be correct may also not be seen or absorbed through the haze of that anger.

The emotion can be so high, as in the case of Festus, that even the hint of a threat or problem that just scratches the surface can draw out in inordinately large reaction.

Paul sort of puts Festus in his place by referring back to Agrippa. Slyly he's setting Agrippa up a bit. The interaction is read well with a tone of banter and even sarcasm.

Paul has made his argument based on Jewish prophecy and the hope of Israel. After Festus throws his fit, he turns back to Agrippa and lays it on thick as he notes the stark difference between the governor and the King. Where the governor is ignorant, the King is knowledgeable and therefore Paul can speak with him openly in a way he can't with Festus. And naturally the King, being observant and the entirety of Jesus' death, the movement that followed, and the reality that it has fulfilled all of this wonderful hope of Israel and Promise of God is evident to Agrippa.

So the loaded question comes. "Do you believe the prophets? I know you do." (wink wink). Paul is painting Agrippa into a corner because if Paul has proven that the prophets pointed to Christ, and Agrippa believes the prophets, then of course

Agrippa must now believe in Christ.

Agrippa's answer isn't easily readable in terms of intent, but if read with that sense of banter, it reads at least a bit playful. "You think you can convert me this easily?" It's not necessarily likely that Paul had converted him and this was a kind of playful affirmation. Kind of like someone offering a piece of delicious pie and saying "you really think you can convince me to eat that so easily?" Of course they can and did....

It may be that Agrippa finds no significant fault with Paul so he's not inclined to be overly harsh but still isn't convinced that Jesus is the Messiah or that Paul's interpretation of Messiah that falls outside the present Jewish understanding is correct. I've also read that it's possible that Agrippa is wondering if he can treat Christianity much the way he treats his Judaism. He is a secular Jew, meaning largely a Jew in name only. Could he get away with the same and the label Christian?

Paul's answer is of course no, he can't. Paul's wish is that everyone be like him, devout and faithful to the center of his being. He says this with yet another bantering dig. "Just like me, well.....except for being locked up I suppose."

The end of this chapter shows to some extent at least a favorable disposition towards Paul as the statement is made that he'd have been set free had he not appealed to Caesar.

There's no certainty that the assessment of the governor, King, and whomever was involved in the hearing is actually correct, that Paul's appeal to Caesar was irrevocable. Perhaps it was. Perhaps they'd sent word and would be embarrassed to not send Paul. Perhaps there was nothing to it, however the Spirit of God moved their heart thusly, ensuring Paul would find his way to Rome.

Whatever the situation, we see one final aspect to this interaction. There is a lot to be said to appeal to someone who shares background, language, and understanding when we are in the hot seat. Finding common ground is a helpful thing. Being able to form a momentary bond that allows for kind of "insider" talk in the midst of those who may not share that commonality has the prospect of gaining an ally. Cultivating a bantering relationship shows a favorable disposition.

Here we see perhaps the most favorable result of Paul's trials even though he's Caesar bound. Agrippa seems to regret that Paul must carry on to Rome. This is a notable turnaround. The Jews to this point have been hostile to Paul and Rome his saving grace. Though that saving grace came at political expediency, it protected him nonetheless. Neither Felix nor Festus wanted to call him guilty but didn't want to pardon him either. Here it seems Agrippa, the King of the Jews, would like to have seen him go free but feels he must be sent to Rome.

Which leads us to the next chapter where Paul sets sail