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Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



SERMON Sept 25—'Evangelism: Why So Scared?' Acts 18:1-3, Acts 2:14-21

This week in our series on evangelism we tackle what I find to be one of the most significant barriers to people engaging in it. Fear.

The fear frequently tracks to what we think evangelism is and has to be. The assumed model for so many people about evangelism is that it entails the religious equivalent of cold calling people for sales. Striking up a chat with a stranger with a foregone agenda feels uncomfortable. Pretending to be someone's friend for a few moments in order to sell them Jesus feels dishonest. It feels manipulative. It's awkward.

For some this mode of evangelism is comfortable. Their outgoing nature lends itself to striking up conversations with people they don't know. Their faith is such that to them it doesn't feel disingenuous to speak to people with an agenda, particularly if that agenda is Jesus. And sometimes, statistically it's rare, but sometimes the message does hit a mark in the right place at the right time.

While this success does occur, statistically this is the exception not the rule. We'll talk more about this in another message.

For this morning, we are talking about our own personal fear as opposed to evangelism strategies.

What we need to hear and embrace is that this style of evangelism is "a" style but it is not "the" style. In fact I suggest that it isn't the style for most Christians.

Evangelism is as individual as we are. All of us have our own personalities and giftedness. Our role in the body, as well as approaching those outside the body is to embrace and roll with our personalities and gifts. To try to be something that we're not cuts against the core of our being. When we try to go against our spiritual center it feels even moreso troubling. We are not at ease. We are stiff and uncomfortable. We are the exact opposite of what we are trying to help people understand Jesus brings out in who we are.

Imagine someone coming to share with you something that is supposed to bring you peace, joy, ease, and a kind compassionate confidence. They themselves are involved with whatever that something is. In their conversation or presentation however they are nervous, awkward, unsure of themselves, and having difficulty fielding questions. Would you believe a word of what they were saying?

Of course not. If I told you I was selling you a product guaranteed to grow your hair back after it's fallen out, that I've been using it for most of my life, and I stand before you cue ball bald I'm not helping my cause any.

We are to be who we are. If we are in Christ common denominators will be kindness, love, grace, openness, patience, gentleness and so on. These are all traits that Christ desires from us. Our way about us, our unique senses of humor, our areas of expertise, our hobbies, our backgrounds, all of this sets us apart as individual. We are allowed to be who we are and God can use that if we are willing to be used to shine the light of Christ in the world and provide opportunities for us to share our faith story.

We don't need to be afraid of who we are.

Look at Peter on the day of Pentecost. He is bold and forward. The Holy Spirit has empowered the apostles and they go forward to speak to the crowd gathered there. As everyone hears their message in their own language, ultimately Peter gives the capping speech. He is fearless, direct, and persuasive. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, his words and ministry take on a new power and effectiveness convincing and converting many who would then take the message home to their own regions.

We see Peter, and too often we are told that we need to be like him. Have his boldness, his unflinching ability to get before a crowd of strangers and just lay the gospel out. We don't. That was Peter. We need to be like ourselves. Because while Peter may have reached the people Peter could reach, those who weren't Peter were able to reach people that he could not.

What we witness in Peter is not new to him. He's always been bold, outspoken, and unafraid. This is his nature and character. Through the ministry of Christ, these attributes caused him to put his foot in his mouth more than once. Now that he's finally understood the fullness of Jesus' message and been filled with the Holy Spirit, these attributes have found a profound usefulness to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ.

What we have to remember is that the Holy Spirit in Peter is using his already given nature to spread the light of Jesus. The same is true for you and I. We have natural tendencies and abilities. We all have skills that come easier to us than perhaps to others. They take us to different places and different people that share in common interests. In those circumstances the Holy Spirit is able to use our already existing personalities as instruments to spread the light and love of Christ.

Another fear is wondering how we get to the people we need to minister to. There is certainly more to it than what we're about to consider and we'll get to it in another message, but at the baseline that we all have our unique personalities, interests, hobbies, responsibilities and so forth means that often we don't need to figure out where to go. We're typically already there.

Paul's meeting Priscilla and Aquila is a prime example of this. Paul and this couple forge a meaningful and fruitful ministerial relationship together. How does it start? They bump into one another because they share a common trade. They are all tentmakers. Their common trade, interest, skill, etc. puts them naturally in proximity to one another and as they get to know each other the relationship forms and strengthens. In this case all three were already believers, but this isn't always the situation.

How often do we find ourselves in places we normally go and are in the company of people who don't believe? How often would we answer that question with "I don't know"? We don't know because we haven't taken the time to know or get to know the people around us. What might we find if we asked? Too frequently it's not if we are around people that don't believe. It's whether or not we notice.

Wherever we go it's normal and innately human to gravitate towards people who are like we are. I hear often the "age conundrum". "I'm too old and don't really know any young people." "I'm too young and don't spend much time with older folks." We see people who are different enough to perhaps even be intimidating. But what if we reframe the way we think?

Chances are good we are around a much more diverse group of people than we realize. Everywhere we go there are not only people we "do stuff" with, but people who wait on us, assist us, and serve us. There are wait staff, cashiers, customer service staff, custodians, floor staff, receptionists, people sharing in the aggravating experience of any waiting room we find ourselves in. They are all different ages, shapes, colors, and sizes.

What if we looked at our differences not as a reason to retreat but to relate. The more different we are, the more opportunity we have to ask questions about each other. Rather than being uncomfortable, what if we became curious. What might we discover? What might we realize connects us to even the seemingly most different person we can think of? Even if the relationship is only for a few moments, what light might we shine that that person hasn't experienced before. As ambassadors for Christ, what might we show them that puts aside their negative assumptions about Christians? One of the unfortunate realities is that assumptions abound. Not just about Christians but even about other aspects of who we are. Assumptions about where we're from. Assumptions because of our age, gender, or whatever labels attach to us. Frequently the assumptions are negative. To defy assumptions is to get someone's attention. This opens the door for the grace and love of Christ in our hearts to shine through.

This morning I want each of us to realize that we are enough. God has already equipped us through our gifts, passions, and unique interests. We have been equipped through our own individual experience of faith and God. If we live out authentic faith we will ultimately set ourselves apart. Then it's a matter of allowing the Holy Spirit to do in us what It did in Peter and Paul. Listen for guidance and direction. Let the Spirit empower and embolden us. Let the Spirit forge in us the courage and curiosity to meet the new and reach out. Who knows what wonderful new relationships we may find? Who knows what souls we may touch? Who knows what will lead to new brothers and sisters in Christ?

BIBLE STUDY Acts 23

Chapter 23 continues the drama from chapter 22 and we get to hear the debate between Paul and the Sanhedrin. The picture is one of the seemingly powerful vs. the seemingly powerless. Paul is addressing them and the Romans are on-lookers waiting to see what the big issue is that had the crowd so worked up they attacked Paul.

Paul starts cordially enough, speaking to them as religious peers and citing his own work and desire to do the correct work of God. This is insulting to the priests and the high priest orders Paul to be smacked in the mouth. It's clear that Paul's messaging is very different from their own. He is offering up Jesus as the Christ and redemption offered through Him. The priests are completely counter this belief and it is in fact blasphemy to them. So the powerful strikes the powerless.

Now we see Paul angry. Who can blame him? It's always good to see the heroes of scripture in their humanity. He's no different than the rest of us in that he too has a point that if he's pushed beyond the anger will rise and he may even lose his cool. Here it takes the form of insulting the high priest directly.

Paul curses the priest announcing that God will have the last word and will "strike" the priest. Perhaps Paul is thinking of a good Old Testament style smiting, we don't know specifically. We do know that Paul calls him a whitewashed wall. A wall that is weak and unstable on the inside but pretty and nice on the outside. This is the priest and all of his cronies. They look good on the outside but their spirituality and religion are devoid of truth by denying that Jesus is the Messiah. The powerless is calling down the omnipotent on the "powerful".

This is gutsy or perhaps just rash on Paul's part. He's poking the bear without question. Paul is outnumbered and before a legitimate tribunal of sorts. In all ways they have the upper hand. The Romans are unreliable in general. They have put this together to get to the bottom of the public disturbance, but likely have little overall care for what these Jews do to each other. The only relevant factor that might benefit Paul is that he is a Roman citizen and they have duties towards legit Romans by law.

Next we see something that we don't talk about much in scripture: sarcasm. When he's told that Ananias is the high priest he apologizes because he knows technically he's broken a rule that he as an observant Jew would and should follow. But he curiously claims he didn't recognize Ananias as the high priest. This makes no sense. Paul would clearly have known.

Insert a sarcastic tone. "I can't recognize you because you're such a fraud and a sham." Paul has come to understand and grasp the scriptures in a way that reveals Christ. In humility and with great passion Paul has given his life to ensure that Jew and Gentile alike have the opportunity to embrace that message. While the high priest comes across as authoritative and bold, in truth he is lost and his authority is window dressing at best.

This isn't unique to Paul and his situation. Anytime someone is both competent and passionate about something and they come face to face with an arrogant fraud, tensions run high. If pushed far enough the expression made famous by Popeye comes to life. "That's all I can stand and I can't stand no more."

Paul then drives home a theological point within the Sanhedrin. He proclaims his role as a Pharisee and his hope in the resurrection. This sparks a heated debate between the Pharisees and Sadducees the ultimately becomes outright violent. Once again Paul's safety is threatened and he needs retrieved and removed by the Romans.

This is a bold move. It's more than trying to shift the conversation and take the attention off of himself. Paul's sense of resurrection and hope is different from the other Pharisees even if it shares some things in common. His resurrection and hope is rooted in Christ and that being the key to a resurrection into eternity. The first resurrection being Jesus. The other Pharisees believe in resurrection and a sense of heaven but the Messianic piece is removed. Nevertheless they are ready to come to the defense of their fellow Pharisee if not to absolve him of any charges of blasphemy but at least to side with him on this important concept of resurrection.

The argument that sparks off also at least gives the Romans some inkling of what is going on. It's mayhem and chaos, but that it stems from this clearly theological difference amongst differing leadership within Israel lets them know that whatever is going on, it's not due to anything that concerns Roman law. It's a religious, Jewish thing.

Think about how this kind of behavior is not a there and then phenomenon. It is also very clearly here and now. Someone is considered an enemy until they can be used as a case in point to prove or illustrate a dearly held ideal or value. You're hated until they realize you agree on some foundational point or issue. Then you become a pawn to try to make a case to the opponent. This wasn't the Pharisees coming to Paul's side and suddenly embracing him. He was a convenient instrument to play against the Sadducees. The result becomes aggressive. Not unlike today when all it takes is someone tap dancing on a hot button liberal or conservative issue, even the most "peaceful", "nice", "kind" people can turn hostile.

Once Paul is safe, we see just how aggravated some of these people are against him. Forty men take a vow to not eat or drink until they've killed him. I often wonder what happened to these men because they clearly failed in their efforts.

How long did they go? How committed were they?

Something of note, and once again tying the then to now, is potentially why these men were so aggravated and worked up. Paul was more than just an agitator. He was a traitor. God and the Jewish religion was also a matter of nationalism and patriotism. The promises of God, including any sense of Messiahship or otherwise were reserved to Jews and Jews alone. It was part of their identity and God's favor resting on them an important piece of that identity. Now Paul has the audacity to incorporate Gentiles into Jewish ideas and theological sensibilities. This is diluting it. No longer are they special but rather Paul is insinuating that Jew and Gentile are one and the same under God.

They are driven to an evil, murderous plot.

Cut to today, how often do we see nationalism and patriotism overshadow genuine faith? People who claim Christ behaving in very unChristlike fashion. Insulting, engaging in violence, intimidation and such because something offended their nationalist sensibilities. The storming of the capital is a case in point.

Patriotism is good. We should take pride in our nation and strive to make it the best it can be. As people of faith we understand that only happens when we exemplify the best of the grace and love of Christ even when and especially when it's difficult.

As Paul is in this tense situation, we see once again a message that he must testify in Rome. This is not just information of a destination and destiny. It is also an encouragement. "Yes, this seems bad, but take heart because you have a divine appointment in Rome that you can't and won't miss."

When Paul's nephew catches wind of the plot he's told to warn the authorities. They in turn decide to move Paul to Felix. When they do it is under extraordinarily heavy guard so that these men don't stand a chance to actually do Paul harm. There is a very clear message here. The Romans don't see any reason to hold Paul there. This is a Jewish squabble, not a matter of Roman law. Because Paul is a citizen they are charged to treat him fairly and keep him from harm. This is a clear sense that there is much greater concern to follow Roman law than it is to worry about fighting second class citizen's religious issues." The result is that Paul is sent off with protection.

Another circumstance is that we see a split in loyalty. The Jews, of whom Paul is a part of their community, turn on him. The Romans, who should hate the Jew are clearly on his side and protecting him. This seems odd. Why would his political enemies love him and his ethnic/cultural people hate him?

This is indicative of another question that I won't presume to fully understand but it bears thought. Why is it that there are "Christians" who are hateful, ignorant, and mean while there are "non-Christians" who are incredibly compassionate, loving, and gracious to their core?

This is a confusing reality. The non-Christian has no other agenda than decency. The "Christian" has little agenda other than self-advancement and engaging whatever indecency leads to that end.

Who is listening to Christ in the heart?

If we believe that God the Father, Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit are one then we believe that to hear one is to hear all. If we believe that the Holy Spirit speaks to all, then Christ speaks to all. If we believe that no one comes to Christ apart from the Holy Spirit (that whole Bible thing), and we believe that all are called then we also believe that the Holy Spirit is speaking to all constantly. So Christ is speaking to all constantly.

Is it possible that there are people who don't have the vocabulary due to life circumstances to attribute the voice of Jesus in their hearts to their actions? Is it possible that there are people in the pews who claim Jesus but have never listened to His voice?

The point here isn't to claim or disclaim salvation for anyone. It's more to recognize the complexity of humanity and our humility before it. To assume that someone is devoid of Christ in the heart because they don't verbally claim Him, yet assume that someone has Christ even though nothing in their life demonstrates Him seems off in this light. Perhaps it's a both/and rather than either/or. I can't say, but it's worth the brain process to wonder what it means to hear Jesus.

We find that once he gets to Felix that the commander hasn't released Paul, but rather sent him to a higher authority to sort the situation out. Felix is the governor over Judea, and a somewhat cruel ruler. Perhaps it's because of the violence and death threat they sense some urgency. The commander sends a summary to Felix of what's happened and his own findings. He sees nothing legally problematic with Paul. Conveniently he brags about "rescuing" Paul but leaves out arresting, holding, and almost beating a Roman citizen without cause.

Felix is willing to hear the case. He holds Paul protectively, still a prisoner, until he can get face to face with Paul's accusers. This means get ready to sound the bell for round 2.