

Sermon, 5 Epiphany B

Isaiah 40:21–31 & Mark 1:29–39

Preached Sunday, Feb. 8, 2009 at St. Philip's, Brevard by RDF

Three Sundays ago, Maria preached a wonderful sermon about Evangelism — what she and others have termed “the dreaded E-word”! Today, I want to build on her remarks, which were a lovely and personal reflection about the power of inviting another person to walk with us on the journey of faith. If you missed it, I encourage you to find the sermon at Maria’s blog or on our parish web.

The Gospel story we have today from Mark doesn’t seem to be about evangelism. It appears to be a story about healing. But when we get to the second half of the passage, we realize there’s more going on. First, Jesus retreats to a quiet place to pray and be alone with God. Throughout the Gospels, we see Jesus doing this: going by himself or with just a few others, to pray and seek the solitude and communion he can only receive by going to a deserted place. But in this instance, Jesus is discovered by Peter, who tells him that everyone is searching for him. We’re told that Peter “hunted” for him. Jesus just wants a little time alone with God — and now he’s being sought the way a hunter seeks his prey!

This brings us to the second thing which is so striking about this story. Even though I’ve read it so many times, to this day I still expect Jesus to say to Peter, “Okay. Tell everyone I’ll be there in a minute to meet their needs.” But look at the text again: that’s definitely not what Jesus does. Instead, he says, “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do” (v. 38). Jesus believes there’s something even more important than teaching and healing the sick — and it’s proclaiming the Good News. Jesus has a clear sense of his mission, that his primary purpose is to tell everyone that the Kingdom of God has come near! Later, Jesus commissions the disciples to go and do likewise: to teach, preach, heal, cast out demons — and especially to proclaim the Gospel.

Why is evangelism first on Jesus’ list? I get the feeling that the other things wouldn’t make sense without the Good News. Sick people are being healed. Sins are being forgiven. The poor and other marginalized people are now included in God’s covenant. And it’s all because Jesus has come to show us God’s heart of unconditional love. When we accept and embrace this love, it is redeeming and healing and forgiving. That’s why it’s news; that’s why it’s Good; and that’s why Christ asks us to proclaim it to others.

Listen again to part of our first reading today: “Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint” (Isa. 40:28–31).

Now, doesn’t that sound like Good News? Especially right now, with all the messes we’re in. The Holy One who created everything has not gone away, but is alive and well — and giving us strength and courage when we think we can’t go on. Doesn’t everyone need to hear this? If you agree with me — even just a little — then you are an evangelist. At its most natural, evangelism is like telling someone about a good movie or a new restaurant. Jayne and I just saw “Slumdog Millionaire,” which received an Oscar nomination for Best Picture. We both loved it! Although definitely not for children or young people, it’s a spectacular movie with a well-told story. There you go: I just evangelized you about a movie (!). It’s not hard to do something similar with your faith. Anyone can politely ask, “Are you a church-goer? Have you found a church home?” And, if the reply is No, you have the perfect

opportunity to invite that person to come to church with you. As Maria said, the vast number of people start attending a new church because someone else invites them. That's what all the studies prove.

Here's a statistic for you: 70 percent of all Episcopalians today weren't born into our tradition. That's more than two-thirds. Since I grew up Episcopalian, I have to tell you how flattering it feels when someone chooses us as their spiritual home. But most people didn't make that choice without being invited by someone who cared enough about them to show an interest in their spiritual well-being.

St. Philip's is no different than any other Episcopal parish or, for that matter, any other mainline congregation. We are slowly starting to realize that we can't assume people will automatically become part of our faith community without any extra effort on our part. The default choice for many Christians today is a community church that trades specific roots for a generic, one-size-fits-all religious experience. If that's what people are looking for, I have nothing against it. But that's not us; that's not our way. We have a deeply rooted and beautiful tradition, which we are proud to tell others about. It's the way many of us have come to know and embrace the Good News of God in Christ Jesus.

Today, we have to put ourselves "out there" more than we used to. St. Philip's has made some strides in this area, but we will have to make more. Our parish web site is one of the best in the diocese, thanks to our great volunteers who maintain and update it regularly. Just recently, I joined the Chamber of Commerce on behalf of the church so we can have our newcomer brochures in a rack at the Brevard Visitor's Center. And we've made some revisions to our 9 a.m. Sunday service to make it more welcoming to visitors. But we're going to need everyone's help to make our newcomers feel welcome. We've got to make room for them so that our parish and the Episcopal Church will have a future. Just as we have our own way of being the Church, we have our own approach to evangelism. This is a new book I've been quoting a lot lately. It's called The Episcopal Handbook. The following is from the section called, "How Episcopalians Evangelize":

The authors point out that we often connect evangelism with Jesus' Summary of the Law: that Jesus asks us to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves. The book says, "We believe that in loving our neighbor, Christ is revealed. And the Bible says that when Christ is lifted up, he will cause all people to come unto him (John 12:32). That's why Episcopalians tend to be rather laid-back when it comes to faith-sharing. We know that the One who really does the work is the Lord. Therefore, our most successful strategy involves being ourselves, loving people, listening to them, praying for them, and being whatever help we can. It means being a friend."*

Being ourselves, loving people and being a friend. When we're at our best, we're pretty good at that. We usually don't put on airs and pretend we're holier than others, and we're often a very friendly and loving bunch of people. Back in the 18th Century, a Christian leader founded a group called The Order of the Mustard Seed. The members of the Order went about spreading the Good News based on three guiding principles: 1. Be kind to all people. 2. Seek their welfare. 3. Win them to Christ.**

Notice the intentional order of these three: first, we establish a relationship through simple human kindness. Second, we promote the well-being of the other person. And only after this do we presume to tell them something they might then want to hear from us: how much God loves them in the person of Jesus. That's not the only way to evangelize, but it's our way — and a good one. And it's something we all can do for the sake of Christ and the Kingdom.

*The Episcopal Handbook. (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2008), p. 134. *Available at a locally owned and operated book store near you!* **Count Nikolaus von Zinzendorf, leader of the Bohemian Brethren in Germany, 1700–1760.