

Reframing and Reclaiming Evangelism

Acts 8:26-40 and John 15:1-8

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Acts 8:26-40

Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

John 15:1-8

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples."



Last month eleven Eastgaters traveled across the state and attended the Annual Meeting of the Pacific Northwest Conference of the United Church of Christ in Spokane. It was a good meeting with good worship and good sharing. It was not a meeting with much controversy or conflict. In fact, one of the only places where I felt some need to stand up and speak was when a colleague of mine raised a question around some language in a brochure promoting becoming a Global Mission community. The language mentioned the word “evangelism” and it caused my colleague to question what that meant and did we all agree on its meaning. As it turned out, my brother in Christ was reading from a brochure that was no longer in use and the language about evangelism had been replaced with other language. The issue seemed to turn into a non-issue and I did not have to put in my two cents – then. But I do get to put in my two cents – now.

Why? Because I do not want to lose the word “evangelism.” A word will mean what it means, of course. If people hear the word “evangelism” and they think it means the practice of trying to convert a non-Christian into being a Christian, then that is what it will mean to them. If they think of people coming to their door and handing out tracts of religious information and applying pressure to make a commitment to accept Christ as one’s Lord and Savior, then this is what evangelism will mean. I know that.

I also know that the word “evangelism” has a long history going into the heart of our faith as people who walk on the Jesus Way. The word “evangelism” comes from two words in Greek: angel and bring. Angel in Greek means “a messenger from God.” The root meaning of an evangelist is “one who brings the good news of God.” Evangelism is therefore, the bringing of good news, the bringing of the gospel, the sharing of, the living into, the witnessing and embodying of the message of Jesus.

Is that such a bad thing? No. But it may be a hard thing. It may be a scary thing. We may say to ourselves: “Who am I to proclaim the good news of God to others? What qualifications do I have? What gives me the right to tell someone else a message that may put their life in question?”

These are good questions to consider. And as we consider these questions it is also very important to remember that people calling themselves Christian have done terrible things in the name of Christ. The story of forced and manipulative conversion that has accompanied military and political conquest is a real wound in our faith history.

But the wrongs of the past do not give us the excuse to give up on this enterprise of evangelism. Neither does the misuse of others in our present day. Just because someone else uses language of judgment and condemnation to refer to those who do not believe the way they do, that does not mean we have no say, or no obligation, in sharing the good news of our faith.

There is a joke that goes: What do you get when you cross a Jehovah’s Witness with a member of the United Church of Christ? Someone who shows up at your door with nothing to say. But that is not true. We do have something to say, although we

prefer others venues than the front door of a stranger to share what we have to say. We have our stories, our encounters with God on a daily basis, our faith history and journey that has shape and meaning through its valleys and mountains, its storms and its oases. All we need is language and permission. All we need to be evangelists is the opportunity to reflect on how God has shaped us and is shaping us still, to stop and look and listen for God's movement in our lives and then, to accept the invitation God provides to share (and God always invites us to share). St. Francis of Assisi is reported to have said: **"Preach the gospel at all times -- If necessary, use words."**

There is a mission song that is not in our hymnals but I learned it somewhere. One verse goes like this:

*We've a story to tell to the nations,
that shall turn their hearts to the right,
a story of truth and mercy,
a story of peace and light,
a story of peace and light.*

Refrain:

*For the darkness shall turn to dawning,
and the dawning to noonday bright;
and Christ's great kingdom shall come on earth,
the kingdom of love and light.*

I think it is worth noting that the tune for this hymn is a marching tune. It is meant, I am sure, to rally the troops in sharing the message of faith. I prefer another tune that speaks about marching. It is called Siyahamba.

*We are marching in the light of God, we are marching in the light of God.
We are marching in the light of God, we are marching in the light of God.
We are marching, We are marching in the light of God.
We are marching, We are marching in the light of God.*

In this song, there is lightness, joyfulness, openness to having the good news of God, the message Jesus lived and preached, without the weight of responsibility that often comes with contemporary evangelistic practices.

There is a song Jerry Leggett wrote to the words of the labor activist, Emma Goldman, "If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution."

Evangelism needs more dancing.

Evangelism needs more open hands. And open hearts.

Evangelism needs a constant reframing or reorientation – away from our ego needs, our anxieties, our family of origin particulars – and toward God. The apostle Paul put it very well in his letter to the church in Corinth:

For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. (2 Corinthians 4)

This gift we bring to the world, is God's gift. It is a gift of life. It is all about love. It is the gift of forgiveness and reconciliation. It is grace, unearned and always offered. It is blessing, continual and free.

Evangelism does not belong to the evangelicals. It belongs to the church, all of the church. We are part of the angel team. Each of us is an angel, a messenger of God, called in diverse and beautiful ways to share how God is working in us and through us for God's purposes. God will use us. Even us. There is no one of us who is any closer to God than any other. There is no one of us who is less able to be a channel of God's extraordinary power than any other.

Each of us is called to bring the good news. Each of us is an evangelist. Evangelism is not about saving souls. It is about sharing the soul we have been given with the world. God saves, not we. Our job is to bring the Good News of what God has done for us with those we meet. God will do the rest. Thanks be to God.

Amen.