

***"The Church As We Approach the 21st Century:
The Challenge of Evangelism"***

***Matthew 28:16-20
November 8, 2009***

***II Timothy 4:1-5
St. James UCC***

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Over the last few Sundays we have been looking at some of the issues that the church as a whole, and this congregation in particular face as we walk into God's future. The issue that I want to think about with you today is what I call the Challenge of Evangelism.

When we think of evangelism we tend to think of someone who knocks on our door and then won't go away, even after we're finished with the conversation. Or, perhaps we think of someone who approaches us with the clear intention of convincing us that they're right and we're wrong. Their message is that unless we begin to believe the way that they do, we're in big trouble. It's not generally a fun experience when someone comes to your door and tells you that their faith is the only true one, and that your's is wrong. This approach is obnoxious, and it also devalues our own faith and the journey of faith that we have been traveling.

I suspect that for many of us, a primary reason why we shy away from the word evangelism is because of these negative images that it brings to mind. We are turned off by these approaches, and so we say, "that's not me. I'm not comfortable doing that. I don't like it when someone does it to me, and I wouldn't do it to someone else". In the process, we never really stop and think about forms of evangelism that might be appropriate for who we are and what we believe.

Jesus' last words to His disciples gave them a very clear charge: "Go and make disciples...baptize...teach". As Christians we have a responsibility, an obligation to share the good news - not to club people over the head with it, but to share it... As Christians we have a responsibility for evangelism - for evangelism as it really is, namely sharing the good news.

Think for a moment about the word share. To share something implies a relationship in which we are equals - a relationship in which there is a caring for one another. You don't club someone over the head to get them to share something, rather you offer it, you invite them to choose to share. Likewise, you don't share something by saying that I'm right and you're wrong, and you're in big trouble if you don't see things the same way that I do. Rather, you share when you say, "I've got something really special here, and I thought that you might be interested. Would you like to hear about it?"

I believe that that's the kind of model that we are urged to adopt in our text from II Timothy. We aren't called to club people over the head with our faith - because if they aren't ready, they won't believe anyway. At the same time, we are told in no uncertain terms that our faith ought to be so important, and that our commitment ought to be so strong that we are sharing what we believe - both by our example as well as by our words. Our faith needs to be so much a part of who we are, that we are persistent in living it and sharing it. We should not hesitate to invite people to worship with us or to pray with us.

There's a real difference between inviting and insisting. It's the difference between an invitation and a command. God can command us. In fact, when God says jump, we ought to respond by asking "how high?" God can and will command us and we respond. But we can't command each other. Sometimes people try, but when someone tries to give you orders as to what you should believe and how you should live, then that person has lost track of who he or she really is. They need to remember that we are not God, we are human. It is God who commands. As humans we only see a part of the truth. We are not capable of seeing it all, and therefore God has called us not to command but to invite. We can and indeed should be inviting one another to consider new possibilities in our search for the truth.

That's a very different model of evangelism, and one that we can all be comfortable with. Instead of saying that I'm better than you, that I have all of the answers and you have none, this approach attempts to invite people to be part of our common efforts. It respects the gifts and the talents that each person brings to the task. It respects what each person has been offering in the service of God and what they have to offer, while inviting them to share with us, just as we are willing to share with them.

Over the years many surveys have been done as to what methods are most effective at bringing in new members. I've looked at survey after survey, and every single one comes to the same conclusion, namely that the most effective way of bringing new members into a church is to invite them. We know that. Our problem is that we see the aggressive ways that some churches invite people, and we say, "that's not us".

That's true. Telling people that we have all of the answers and they have none of them is not us, but that doesn't relieve us of the obligation that Jesus has placed on each of us when He said, "Go and make disciples of all people". That charge was not just placed on the eleven disciples who were there to hear it. It reaches over the ages to us who are gathered here today.

In addition, I believe that the focus of evangelism has often been in the wrong place. When we think about evangelism we tend to think about numbers. How many visitors come here to worship? How many new people join?

I would suggest to you today that Jesus didn't say to His disciples go and bring in a hundred new members. Rather he said, "Go and make disciples".

What I hear in Jesus instruction has less to do with numbers than it does with faith, with enthusiasm, and with genuine caring. The obligation that Jesus places on us is not a ministry of numbers that says small churches are failures, big churches are better and mega churches are the best. Rather, what I hear Jesus saying to each of us is that our faith ought to be so important to us, that we want to share it.

Our faith ought to be so important to us that we are trying to live it - each and every moment of each and every day. Our faith ought to be so important to us that it guides the decisions that we make and the ways that we relate to one another. Our faith ought to make a real difference in our lives, and when it does, we become a model of faith for others. They look at us and see that we live differently because of our faith. Our faith needs to be reflected in all that we do, all that we are, all that we seek to be, so that the light of it shines into the world around us.

When the weather's nice and warm, we usually open the windows of our sanctuary, and it's not uncommon to pick up the odors of pizza and wings cooking from the pizzeria next door. These odors permeate the air around us.

When someone is trying to sell a house, one of the suggestions they might hear is that before someone comes to look at it, they should bake bread so that the inviting aroma of freshly baked bread fills the house.

And that's how it should be with us. As we travel our faith journeys, as we share together as a people of God, that sweet aroma of faith should cling to us, so that the good news that we have experienced is reflected in the world around us.

That is evangelism at it's best. The challenge of evangelism is to change the world around us, by bringing in the light of Christ, by allowing it to be reflected through us. Evangelism takes place when our faith and our faithfulness begin to change the world, not because we are dictating to others how they should live, but because our faith has shaped the way that we live, and the choices that we make, and because we genuinely care about each other.

As we walk into the future, the challenge of evangelism is a challenge to each one of us. We are challenged by Christ to live out our faith so enthusiastically, so faithfully, that others will want to find out what we're so excited about.

Amen.