



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“PRESBYTERIAN EVANGELISM”

SCRIPTURE LESSONS: MATTHEW 9:35 - 10:8

This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Rev. James T. Rogers on Sunday, January 11, 2009 at the 11:15 a.m. service.

Last fall the church officers met for our annual leadership retreat. I am using the term retreat quite loosely here, because the threat of Hurricane Hanna changed our retreat date and moved us from Camp Saint Christopher back to the church. Nevertheless, it was a great time of discussion and learning led by Ed White of the Alban Institute where we explored two main questions: “What difference do we want the church to make in the lives of our people?” and “What are the primary strengths and vulnerabilities of our congregation?” The most helpful exercise that Ed led us through involved looking at the eight characteristics of healthy congregations. Our strengths included inspiring worship and loving relationships. Our two weaknesses were by a long shot, passionate spirituality and evangelism.

In a message sent to all Presbyterian Church (USA) congregations last year, our former General Assembly Moderator, the Reverend Joan Gray shared the following: “Evangelism continues to be a really tough nut to crack for many Presbyterians. We worry about our shrinking churches, but we are not comfortable, by and large, talking with people outside the church (or sometimes inside it!) about our faith.”¹

What is it about evangelism that makes us so uncomfortable? In its essence evangelism is simply the activity of sharing the joy and justice of the gospel. It’s sharing that through Jesus Christ God has restored the broken relationship between humans and God. And according to Scripture evangelism is something that is an essential part of one’s life as a disciple of Jesus Christ. However, for many of us just the mention of that word brings up our own real life experiences of awkward and uncomfortable conversations or interactions that involve someone trying to coerce another into changing how he or she thinks and lives. I even debated about whether or not to include the “E” word in my sermon title. For many people “evangelism” has become a bad word with so many bad connotations that many don’t like to say it. It brings up images of street preachers yelling and screaming about hell and religious tracts being forced into peoples’ hands.

In his book *Talking About Evangelism*, Mark Davis shares his own personal experience. After returning home from his first semester at college, he attempts to use the evangelism methods that he had learned in his college class during a visit with an admired high school teacher named Sam. Davis writes,

I told Sam that I had been thinking of him and wanted to introduce him to Jesus Christ. To his credit, Sam was very polite during this strange turn in our conversation, a politeness that I took to mean that I was getting somewhere with him. But as polite as he was, he was not quite willing to play along as the textbooks had described. My words to him must not have been convincing, because my entreaties for him to give me a chance to pray “the sinner’s prayer” with him were not successful. So after finally having run out of options, I simply said, “Don’t worry, I praying for you, Sam.” Then Sam exploded. In a sanitized version his words were

¹ Gray, Joan S., “Cracking a Tough Nut.” [<http://www.pcusa.org/pcnews/2008/08218.htm>], March 28, 2008.

something like, “Take your prayers and your holier-than-thou attitude and get the heck out of my office! And don’t bother coming back until you leave that stuff at home.”²

Davis knew he had followed the evangelism method that he had been taught, but at the same time felt like he had done something terribly wrong.

At this point in Matthew’s gospel we find Jesus making his way through cities and villages teaching, proclaiming, and curing. Just before our Scripture lesson we read that Jesus has healed two demon possessed men and a paralytic, called Matthew to be a disciple, answered questions about fasting, and healed a dead girl, a sick woman, two blind men and a man who could not speak. Needless to say Jesus has been busy. And after seeing the great multitude of people who were like a sheep without a shepherd, and feeling compassion for them, Jesus says to his disciples: “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” Jesus sees that there are so many people who need to hear the good news and experience his healing, and without hesitation he summons the twelve disciples and gives them authority over unclean spirits and instructs them to cure every disease and sickness. Jesus chooses twelve seemingly ordinary people and gives them an extraordinary task. They are to go to the lost sheep of Israel and proclaim the good news that the kingdom of heaven has come near – that God’s rule is at hand. These disciples now apostles by virtue of being sent are called to no ordinary tasks. They are to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons. It can be easy for us to get tripped up on some of these tasks: raising the dead and casting out demons! But what are these disciples really up to? They are sharing God’s grace. They received without payment and are giving without payment. Freely they have received and freely they are giving. After receiving the good news of Jesus Christ, they are sharing it with others. They are sharing the joy and justice of the gospel. They are participating in evangelism.

As disciples of Jesus Christ our task is the same: we are called to share the good news. We are called to share God’s grace. How can we participate in evangelism in a way that is faithful to the gospel and at the same time follow the second greatest commandment – loving our neighbor as ourselves?

Typically when one evangelizes another he or she starts from the point of human sinfulness. One spring break in college I went to Daytona Beach on a mission trip. Each night we stood on street corners and began our conversations in the same way: “Do you realize that you are a sinner?” This icebreaker certainly led to some very interesting conversations and confrontations! In college I was also taught the “Romans Road” way of evangelization which begins with Romans chapter three verse twenty-three: “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Certainly human sinfulness is a part of the gospel story, for that is exactly why we need a savior, yet is that where we have to begin? What about Genesis chapter one when God made humankind in his image and saw that it was “very good.” The very beginning of the Bible reminds us that we are all created in the image of God and therefore originally and primarily belong to God.³ The look and feel of evangelism must change with the realization that we all are created in God’s image.

It’s also important for us to understand that God’s redemptive work in Christ goes before us. George Stroup, my theology professor at seminary, begins the book *Many Voices, One God* with the observation that “too often churches have understood themselves to be taking God to a godless world rather than following God into a world in which God is redemptively present.”⁴ Wherever we evangelize, God is already there working and acting. When the disciples were sent to the people of

² Davis, D. Mark, *Talking About Evangelism* (2007: Pilgrim Press, Cleveland), pp. 19-20.

³ Davis, D. Mark, *Talking About Evangelism* (2007: Pilgrim Press, Cleveland), p. 40.

⁴ Guthrie, Shirley C., Walter Brueggemann, and George W. Stroup. *Many Voices, One God: Being Faithful in a Pluralistic World*, January 1998.

Israel, God was already present with Israel. Remember God's words spoken by the prophet Hosea? Even when Israel was disobedient God said, "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?" Mark Davis explains that with the understandings that "originally and primarily, each one belongs to God" and "the redemptive presence and work of Christ goes before us...a whole new world of dialogue opens up for evangelism. Everyone's story is a 'faith journey' in some way, no matter how angry, confused, or destructive that journey may be."⁵

Unfortunately evangelism models tend to be in the form of a monologue. The most blatant of this form is the street preacher yelling and screaming to those who pass him by. But even in friendlier contexts what may look like a dialogue between two people is essentially a monologue. "I am a child of God, I have experienced grace, I know the truth, and I need to help you. You are lost in sin, you are under judgment, you are living a lie, and you need to become like me."⁶ Instead, evangelism should take the form of dialogue, where the evangelist doesn't work primarily to uncover the weakness or error in another person's life, but instead listens for God's redemptive presence. In true dialogue we listen for stories of God's grace in another person's faith journey and then share our own stories of God's grace in our lives. Rather than assuming the role of expert, instead we take the role of companion connecting the life story of another and our life story with God's story. Through this activity of storytelling people are more open and interested in hearing what is important and meaningful to us, even when they might have refused our attempts to convert them.

Two years passed before Mark Davis gained the courage to visit his high school teacher Sam after his failed attempt to evangelize him. And when Sam asked Davis about the best thing that had happened in his life that year, Davis simply talked about a small group of guys that he met with each morning before breakfast to check in with one another about the day's events. They would share concerns about upcoming tests or confusing relationships, express words of encouragement, and then pray for one another. This group time had become very important to Davis and gave him support each day. After Davis shared, Sam replied, "That was one of the most powerful stories of community that I have ever heard. It tells me a lot more about Christianity than that other stuff that you brought with you the last time we visited. I'm not kidding, that story really speaks to me."⁷ Davis writes,

There was no call for a conversion, no "sinner's prayer," no "Roman Road," and no angry outbursts. It was just an opportunity for me to share something meaningful about my life with someone else. And while I had no intention of practicing evangelism, I think I stumbled across a very authentic and biblical way of doing evangelism that day. That occasion convinced me that there is a way of sharing the joy and justice of the gospel that is not a violation of another person's dignity.⁸

Interestingly enough, six years later, when Davis and Sam would happen to bump into each other at a toy store, it was Sam, now an elder in the church, who invited Davis to join Hilton Presbyterian. And Davis did.

As disciples of Jesus Christ, we are called to share the good news with others. While evangelism may bring up negative images and emotions, there are ways that we can share the gospel and love our neighbors as ourselves at the same time. We can start with the understanding that all people originally and primarily belong to God, we can acknowledge that God's redemptive work in Christ goes before us, and we can engage in true dialogue that involves storytelling – our story, their story,

⁵ Davis, D. Mark, *Talking About Evangelism* (2007: Pilgrim Press, Cleveland), p. 43.

⁶ Davis, D. Mark, *Talking About Evangelism* (2007: Pilgrim Press, Cleveland), p. 41.

⁷ Davis, D. Mark, *Talking About Evangelism* (2007: Pilgrim Press, Cleveland), p. 27.

⁸ Davis, D. Mark, *Talking About Evangelism* (2007: Pilgrim Press, Cleveland), p. 27.

and God's story. In doing so we can freely offer the grace of God that we have received freely to a world that needs it.

What are some practical ways that we can participate in evangelism? Former Moderator, Reverend Joan Gray shares three ideas:⁹

Craft and practice a faith "elevator speech."

When I was a candidate for Moderator of the 217th General Assembly (2006), someone told me that I must be able to tell someone why they should want me to be moderator between the time they got on an elevator with me and the time they got off. I think every Presbyterian should have an "elevator speech" in answer to questions such as, Why are you a Christian? What difference does God make in your life? It would give us a jumping off place to talk about faith and help us get over our evangelistic lockjaw.

Carry a give-away Bible.

Buy several small, inexpensive Bibles or Scripture portions and mark with a highlighter some passages that are particularly powerful for you in terms of the gospel message. Carry one of these around with you in your car, purse, or in your carry-on bag when you fly. If you get into a religious discussion, give the person the Bible with your blessing and invite them to read the marked passages. You can even read the passages with them to open the door to further conversation.

Pray that God will bring people across your path who need to hear of and experience God's love.

Expect it to happen. Pay attention and be prepared to respond graciously and authentically. There really are people out there who are desperate to hear some good news about themselves and the world. We have that good news! If we are willing, God will use us to plant seeds of the gospel in people's lives.

Research reveals that more than seventy five percent of new members in any congregation visited worship the first time due to a personal invitation from someone who attends that church.¹⁰ How has God worked wonders in your life? Think about your own faith journey. Who in your life so desperately needs to hear your story?

In just a few minutes we will be celebrating the Lord's Supper. Here we experience communion with God and one another. Through Jesus' death and resurrection we are offered new life. In a world of perceived scarcity, at this table all can be fed. As we eat the bread of life and drink from the cup of salvation, may God nourish all of us that we may go out and share the good news to the world.

⁹ Gray, Joan S., "Cracking a Tough Nut." [http://www.pcusa.org/pcnews/2008/08218.htm], March 28, 2008.

¹⁰ Miller, Herb, "Attracting New People: Are We Building the Bridges?" *The Parish Paper*, July 2007.