

Sermon: Sunday, July 3, 2022 – Luke 10: 1-11, 16-17
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley

A few times in my life, I have taken on the task of doing door-to-door fundraising, most often for a health-related charity. As an introvert, door-knocking not number one on my list of “things I like to do” but so long as I was clear on the cause, especially if I had a personal connection to the cause and perhaps even a first-hand story to tell, it was doable. I will say that it became both more easily doable - and much more lucrative - when our kids were little and I could bring one along, as this both lessened the worries about a stranger standing on your doorstep and tended to defuse any longwinded debates (which generally didn’t end up with a donation, anyway).

Today’s gospel reading goes back to the earliest days of the mission and ministry of Jesus, and an early story of Christian Evangelism, seventy-two disciples sent out two by two to do town-to-town, door to door canvassing. They weren’t equipped with a zippered donation bag or a receipt book or a cute child to move things along – in fact, they were ordered to have nothing, not a satchel or petty cash or even sandals - but like the door-to-door fundraiser, these two-by-two messengers had personal stories to tell. They could tell of transformation; they could share what had caused them to interrupt their previous lives, to follow Jesus; they could bring hope through an unfolding vision of a world made new, where those in need would have their needs met, with those pushed to the fringes now in a central place of honour. And while Luke puts a note of finality on the whole thing with the guidance to leave them to their own devices if a town does not accept you or the message, even in that there is a degree of agency afforded those hearing the message: the invitation was theirs to accept or reject.

As a Canadian Mainline Protestant congregation in the early 21st century, Evangelism isn’t a word or concept that comes easily to us. Some of our hesitation is well-founded, as over the centuries the Church has too often relied on force, guilt and fear in bringing people to Christ. The Church’s history of first contact with Indigenous peoples, in this land and in countless lands around the world, bears a shameful legacy of such coercion. And in recent years, there’s come to be an entire generation (or two) that understands ALL of Christianity to be bigoted, narrow and judgmental, to the point that inclusive, progressive Christians really need to be “evangelists” for the notion that there IS such a thing as a *progressive* Christian. Last week we heard words from Robert Schnase, encouraging Churches to “practice the gracious love of Christ, respect the dignity of others, and...become part of God’s invitation to new life” and at its best, pairing that quality of eager invitation with the amazing words of Jesus Christ is what Christian Evangelism is all about. And yet, as a life-long United Church kid, I still have to admit that Evangelism does often feel like “somebody else’s word” – and I make that admission to the detriment of the mission of Jesus.

Long-time United Church professor John Webster Grant, writing in 1983, urged our denomination to recover “the primary meaning of the word ‘evangelism’, which is not *making Christians* or even *saving souls* but publishing glad tidings.” Picking up on that ‘glad tidings’ image, then, informs us that Evangelism has little connection with handing out heaven-or-hell tracts on a streetcorner, but emanates from the joy of Angels sharing the good news of Jesus with the Shepherds, and the commission to the Shepherds to share the glad tidings of a God who dwells with us and in us.

Continuing in this exploration of what Evangelism could mean in a United Church context, another long-time United Church professor, John Young wrote in 2009 that in its essence,

Evangelism “is not about gaining ‘numbers’, but about sharing a story, a story that Christians find life-giving and transformative, in the hopes that others may find it so”. Here again we hear of invitation: naming the good news of God’s presence in your life, my life, our lives, and by doing so, opening the door for others to go deep in their story to discern where God is moving them.

So at this point of the sermon, I have a practical question for you to consider. Three times in recent months, people have raised a similar suggestion to me and now I share it with you. Do you have a story, of the way that your life journey has been transformed, redirected, made new, by your interactions with the Holy? Are there moments where you have felt the Holy Spirit, or God, or the risen Christ, guiding your way? Have you felt a divine nudge moving your life in a new direction? And if you have, could you imagine yourself sharing that story with others, perhaps even at the “Celebration of Mission, Ministry and Stewardship” part of the Sunday service? If this speaks to you, even a bit, find me after Worship or drop me an email. I’d love to hear that story and I suspect others would as well.

Now, back to today’s reading.

According to Luke, Jesus sent out his emissaries in two waves. The first wave, detailed in the 9th chapter of Luke, one chapter before today’s reading, was the sending of the inner ring of disciples – the twelve - into the communities around Galilee. All (or nearly all) of these twelve disciples, were local Galileans, from towns like Nazareth, Cana, Capernaum, Bethsaida. The first sending, then, was local.

This local mission work up to that point had not been easy. There was much opposition and some narrow escapes. But rather than being thwarted by the anger of his neighbours and relatives, Jesus looked at the assets at hand and said to the 12 disciples, “you go into these towns and villages, and do the things I would do. Tell them of their hopeful future. Bring God’s healing intention to them and make them whole. And let them look after you: trust them so much that you don’t even bring along an extra shirt, or pocket money.” (Luke 9: 1-5) For safety’s sake, and to always provide a witness to the truth of what was being said, they were sent in pairs into the nearby towns and villages with the power to do everything that Jesus would have done. In so doing, there were thirteen of them doing the work that used to be mostly done by Jesus alone.

Having sent out this first wave – and receiving back reasonable reports of success – Jesus sends out a bigger group. This time, seventy-two of them go out, again in pairs. Scholar Robert Tannehill reminds us that this second set of evangelists were not sent to do the exact same task as the first group of twelve. This was not just a second try at the same task.

While the first disciples stayed close to home, visiting only the Jewish towns in Galilee, here in the 10th chapter of Luke, the mission of Jesus was moving toward Jerusalem. This was less familiar territory, and this group of (seventy or) seventy two were to be more an advance party going ahead of Jesus, than a replacement party going instead of Jesus. This group was to be broader in its approach, going to all communities, Jewish towns and Gentile towns, proclaiming a new realm where God’s inclusive love would be known by all.

This second set of missionaries, then, moved outwards, from the more familiar toward the less familiar. They went, as part of a dynamic and expanding mission, a ministry that was literally “on the move” from Galilee to Jerusalem; and this time, Jesus himself would follow them to these towns, utilizing the groundwork his disciples had done before him.

When I compare these two missions, one smaller and closer to home, one larger and moving into unknown territory, it speaks to me of the way that Church life works in our time and place. Some parts of what we do are closer to home, more focused on the needs of the congregation and the group that gathers here for worship. Other parts of what the work we support is elsewhere in this land or in another part of the world. Part of our work happens in community based work here in the Bow Valley, like the Rundle Thrift Shop in Banff, or the Healing Pathway, or the walk of Right Relations; other parts have a global reach, like Mission & Service donations, or the efforts of refugee support projects based in these congregations to welcome and support people who have been displaced from their homelands.

Coming back to the “E” word, we need Evangelists willing to do *and speak of* all this work: the things we do up close, the initiatives that reach out from here, the projects that reach to national or even international needs. John Young, in the article referenced earlier, outlines the change within the United Church of Canada, a significant focus on Evangelism in the 1950s morphing into a greater focus on Mission in the 1980s. Over those decades, there came to be a greater desire to tangible acts of service - *doing* Christ’s work - and less enthusiasm to *put words to it*. While still putting our hands to the plough in acts of service, we also need to re-learn the art of naming where God is present in the things we do: to remind ourselves, and to set a sacred context for those who are yearning for something deeper in their lives but cannot put words to that yearning. (And, as mentioned earlier, to help folks to see that to be a Christian does not necessarily confine one to being “narrow.”)

That rhythm between up-close actions, and actions further afield, takes us right back to the days of Jesus. They started close to home where there was both familiarity and resistance, then they went far afield into populations where they had no experience, relying on the guidance of local people and the grace of God. In going near and far, in going out into the world, and coming back to a place of nurturance with Jesus, they kept learning and growing, risking and inviting, encouraging change and being changed, in his name. At our best, we continue live within that rhythm, of doing, and believing, and paying attention and listening and doing again, as people committed to Christ’s agenda of powerful, inclusive, reconciling love.

In all of this we give thanks: for words of life that give us hope; for all we do together, for the work we do on our own, for the times we feel strong in what we are doing, and for the times when the support of loving Christian community is so essential. We give thanks for the opportunity to gather in Canmore and Banff, for the connections we continue to have with those joining us online, and for the words and deeds by which we share the “glad tidings” of God in Christ. All of this, is pure gift from God, experienced in supportive community, in simple acts of advocacy and kindness, and in broader engagement in the name of Jesus, who lived and died and lives again. Thanks be to God, Amen.

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