

“The ‘E’ Word”

John 3.1-17

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I’ve shared this with you before: What do you get when you cross a Presbyterian with a Jehovah’s Witness? Someone who knocks on the door and doesn’t know what to say.

Repeat after me: *Presbyterian ... evangelism*. See – you *can* say that word! Yes, this is the “E” word: *evangelism*. I know – some of you are already freaking out. For many Presbyterians, the word “evangelism” conjures up images of crazy streetcorner preachers, scary Bible tracts, extreme fundamentalism, and “holy roller” churches. I want to help expand your understanding of this word.

Evangelism will be our primary focus this year. Last year our focus was *worship*, and based on your input we made significant changes to our worship services. Before that, we focused on *spirituality*, and based on your input we added numerous opportunities for adults to grow in faith. This year, the focus is *evangelism*. Once again, we will give you an opportunity to provide input. As most of you know, we’ve been using an assessment tool to identify what we *most* need to improve in order to be a healthy, vibrant, growing community of faith. This is not the time to explain or defend that tool; the point is, in 2016, *evangelism* is where the most improvement is needed. *Need-oriented* evangelism, to be specific; I’ll explain that later on. I need to stress that this tool only tells us *what* we need to work on – not *how* to work on it. This is not a cookie-cutter approach; nobody is telling us *specific* changes we need to make. The goal is *not* to make us like any other church that’s out there. The goal is to help us grow in our own *unique* way of being the absolute best and most faithful congregation we can possibly be.

The word *evangelism* comes from a Greek word, *euangelion*. *Euangelion* means “good news” or “glad tidings.” There’s also a verb, *euangelizo*, which means to “announce good news” or “share glad tidings.” Quite literally, if you are *evangelizing*, that means that you are *sharing good news*. These were fairly common words in classical Greek, going all the way back to Homer; people literally had been using these words for *a thousand years* before Christianity ever existed. They show up frequently in the New Testament, where *euangelion* is usually translated as “gospel,” which comes from the Old English word *godspel*, which means “good message” or “good story.” The gospels themselves are called *euangelia*; there is the *euangelion* according to Matthew, the *euangelion* according to Mark, the *euangelion* according to Luke, and the *euangelion* according to John. So at the most basic level, *evangelism* has to do with *sharing good news*. Your car mechanic tells you your bill is less than you feared it would be – that’s good news. Your daughter tells you that fine young man you really like has proposed to her –

that's good news. A couple years later, she tells you that she's pregnant – that's good news. When you hear good news, it makes you joyful. Evangelism, in its true sense, is about *bringing people joy*.

So why are we so afraid of this word? Why does “evangelism” make many Presbyterians want to run fast in the other direction? Maybe some of the ways evangelism has been done in this country haven't felt like *good news*. *You're a sinner and you need to repent!* It's true, we all *are* sinners and we all *do* need to repent, but the way that message gets *packaged* sometimes turns many of us off.

Last summer I was swimming at the outdoor pool at MSU. In the men's locker room, there at the IM Sports West building, in the bathroom stall, on the back of the door, somebody had posted a large sticker. Somebody else had tried to rip it off, but there was still enough of it left that the message was pretty clear, basically conveying: “Unless you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, you are going to burn in hell for all eternity.” You're sitting there taking care of business, and this thing is just *staring* at you. *Good news?* Hardly. Feels more like a tactic to *scare* people into becoming Christians.

See, here's the problem: we have *the most amazing news to share that has ever been shared in the entire history of the human race* – yet some forms of modern American Christianity tend to package it in a way that doesn't make it sound like good news, while *other* forms of modern American Christianity (like us!) basically don't share it at all. Maybe – *maybe!* – we invite somebody to church. But even if we invite someone to church, that's not the same thing as inviting them into a *joyful, life-giving, adventurous, courageous, Spirit-filled relationship with God in Jesus Christ*. It's just *not* the same.

I need to be honest with you. Our denomination is *not* very good at this. Many churches in our denomination have taken this assessment, and in the majority of cases, evangelism shows up as the biggest issue that our churches need to work on. But it's not a priority; there's virtually no teaching, training, or equipping that's happening – so it is *any wonder* that we have shrunk *every year* for *fifty years* in a row? *Thousands upon thousands* of Presbyterian churches are bleeding and dying. There is heartache and pain throughout this denomination as church after church finds itself saying, “Last one out the door, turn off the lights.” I have *no desire* to see *that* story happen *here*. I don't think you do either. If we're going to write a different story here ... then we need to get serious about evangelism.

I want to tell you about my friend Tim. Tim was the first *evangelical Presbyterian* I had the privilege of getting to know. We met at Princeton. I was a teaching assistant for the introductory Greek course; Tim was one of my students. He was *extremely* intelligent – he was a Stanford grad – and he could talk *circles* around me in philosophy and theology. He was friendly, inquisitive, honest, sincere, caring, a man of deep personal integrity, fun to be around – and he knew his Bible *really* well. Day after day Tim would come up to me after class, his NIV Bible in one hand and his Greek New Testament in the other. He'd point to one of his favorite scripture passages, and he'd ask me, “Why did they translate it *this way* when the Greek says *this?*” I developed a *ton* of respect for him. See, I had thought that evangelical Christians were all judgmental and closed-minded. Tim proved me wrong. *Very* wrong. What I discovered, as our conversations continued and our friendship deepened, was that *I* was the one who was judgmental. *I* was the one who was closed-minded. I had stereotyped evangelical Christians, based on the extreme versions that are out there. Once I found myself in the company of a deeply

committed evangelical Christian (and enjoying it!), I discovered that the stereotypes were neither fair nor accurate. There's a lot to like about people who take the gospel both *seriously* and *thoughtfully*, and I've discovered that there are a *lot* of people like Tim out there, some of whom have become very good friends. After seminary, Tim launched a non-traditional start-up church, he earned a PhD, and he's now a professor of theology at Columbia Theological Seminary, one of our Presbyterian seminaries.

Those stereotypes *get in the way*. We've all seen the extreme versions of evangelism, and we don't care for it, so we shy away from being evangelical *at all* – which actually makes us *unfaithful to the gospel*. The last thing Jesus says in the gospel of Matthew (and arguably the most important) is that we are to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28.19). It's like to the *first* thing Jesus says to Simon Peter: “Come, follow me, and I will send you out to fish for people.” (Matthew 4.19) Jesus tells us to *go fishing* – but we don't. If churches like ours have any hope for a bright future – if we're serious about following Jesus – then *we need to stop neglecting evangelism*. We need to learn how to fish.

You know, we used to hold *revivals* here at this church. Seriously. *This* congregation. From a history of our church written in 1901: “Early in the year 1873 there was a great revival, and on March 9, 48 were received into the church and a month later, 20 more, 68 in all.... Another revival in 1876 ... added 42 more to the church roll.” That's 110 people who joined the church because, once upon a time, this church knew how to fish. Somewhere in the 20th century we forgot how. It's time to re-learn.

According to the 2010 census, there are over 8,200 people living in the city limits of Mason, and another 3,600 in the surrounding Vevay Township. That's nearly 12,000 people. Where are all those people going to church? Many of them aren't going *anywhere*. Our youth consistently tell us that most of their classmates *don't go to church*. There are plenty of fish in the pond – but *we don't know how to catch them*. Many non-Christians don't see *any reason* why going to church would benefit them in *any way*. This is why we use the phrase *need-oriented* evangelism. Here's what that means: “Need-oriented evangelism intentionally cultivates relationships with pre-Christian people [that is, people who don't know *squat* about Jesus or the Bible or the Christian life] so they can become fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ who are actively participating within the life of the church and community. Using appropriate ministries and authentic relationships, believers can guide others into the family of God.” Need-oriented evangelism is about meeting people *where they're at* ... and nurturing them in the faith.

I have only one thing to ask of you today: that you *participate in this process*. I know this topic makes some of you *really* uncomfortable. That's okay. Whether you're excited or scared to death or somewhere in between, I want to invite you – *encourage* you – *ask* you – to come to one of four focus group conversations we will hold on Wednesday, April 20. There will be sign-up sheets during fellowship hour today and in the weeks to come. If none of the times work for you, then write down why *you* think we struggle with evangelism, and get it to us. *Anybody* can participate – you don't have to be a member. We want to hear your perspectives, your experiences, and your concerns. We'll use what you tell us to help us determine the key issues that we *really* need to work on. This is *all* I'm asking of you today: that you *participate in one of these conversations*. I can't say this strongly enough: *the future of this church is at stake*. If you care about the church ... or if you care about *Jesus* ... you'll come.

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