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# Sermons

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10 June 2018

## *Evangelism: What does that even mean?*

*Acts 8:26-40 and Psalm 145*

I don't know how you feel when someone says, "Look here, there's some water there. What prevents you from baptizing me?" Yeah, it's a little awkward. Now I know you are thinking it often happens to me when I am a pastor, and it does. But imagine if you were just going about your daily life, wherever you find yourself in your daily life, and someone says, "You there, you seem pretty excited about following Jesus and I'd like to too; let me go find some water."

In a sense it's called reverse evangelism. Evangelism is a word we use. The basic definition: you get excited about your journey of faith and you tell someone about it. And in our world today that is about the only thing we agree on in the Christian world when it comes to that word: Evangelism. We agree on a basic definition: share the story of how you heard about Jesus or how you experienced love in Christian community. Reverse evangelism is when what I just said happens, someone walks up to you and asks you to tell them about your faith.

I remember the first time an adult asked me to baptize them. I was quite used to adults coming up to me and asking me to either baptize their children or as I always love, "We'd like to get our daughter done," which always makes me think of so many things to say and I always have to say, "Do you mean you would like her to be baptized?"

"Yeah that's what we mean."

Okay. So, it's quite startling when people gather around us and say, "You there, put water on me. Tell me why this is so important to you, this Jesus fellow, this faith community."

One of the amazing things with Evangelism, either way, is that it changes the people involved. Often, we think, of course, of the person receiving the good news for the first time; they are changed. But you will find yourself changed if you are the person too, whether you are the person who cries out to be baptized or the person who says, "I have the weirdest thing to tell you. I started going to church." But I must tell you, we Christians, we disagree about this word too.

Some folk think that the only way for someone to be loved by God is to be told they are loved by God. In other language, some think it is essential that to save someone they must tell them about God's love. It always made me think, hmm, I think perhaps God has already known of their

existence, that God has been with them every day of their life already, and I would love to tell them about that but I don't need to tell them *so that they can be loved* by God. I want to tell them so that they know *they already are loved* by God. I also remember one of the first religious teachings I received from my mother. We were walking downtown, and a man walked up to us and gave us a piece of paper and said you must believe. I looked at my mom as I always did (until I was thirteen when I stopped looking to her for answers). I looked at my mom and I said: what does he think he is doing? And she was in a compassionate mood and said, "he thinks he is going to go to heaven - the more people he tells, the more of a chance he gets to go to heaven. And while we disagree that he needs to do anything we can try and be gracious to him as he works out his faith journey."

I am not always so compassionate in my mind or in my mouth when someone hands me a paper or tells me about their faith journey. I live in a pluralistic community and I always wonder what comes attached to with this good news? Because many people believe that evangelism isn't just telling someone about Jesus' existence, it's about handing on their chosen moral code. "I need you to know about Jesus and I need you to act in this way, behave like this." "Hello, I want to share the love of Jesus with you unless you are a..." And so, evangelism which should be, and I want it to be, a wonderful word that we all can use, is a word that is complex and complicated.

And so, it's interesting to note our scripture this morning which is one of the first times we see a Christian meeting someone of a different culture and different religion who specifically does that reverse evangelism, that "tell me more I am trying to understand." Let us note the conversation starts because it has been *requested*; a question has been asked that for Phillip means telling his story of Jesus. Phillip does not say, but you must be baptized first, but rather gets to baptize this foreigner because of the eunuch's transforming faith and request for baptism. And then, weirdly enough, Phillip *doesn't follow* him around for the next 30 days to make sure he gets it right.

I am not saying it isn't helpful to have someone with you on your journey with Christ, it is very helpful. Our last membership class, we often had people opening the Bible saying, what do I do with that? Did Jesus mean that? Community is essential for those conversations. What wasn't essential was for Phillip to follow the eunuch home and say "now you must," (ask your queen for this or behave in this certain way). He assumed that with the scriptures in hand the eunuch would find people to talk about Jesus with in his home context and that they would wrestle it out. None of the twelve disciples would have known what it would mean to be a eunuch and a Christian. The eunuch would need to discern that for himself with his community and context. While it can be hard to trust after I have "done" (baptized) someone's daughter and she goes off into the world with her parents and grandparents and sometimes I never see them again. But I do trust God.

I want to also spend some time this morning talking about disagreements in the United Church of Canada being that it's our anniversary and we celebrate all our birthdays by usually having a theological debate. So, when the United Church of Canada was formed they created a "basis of

union”, a bedrock, a collection of some of the things that we all agree on today that will allow us to live together. It is still alive today. The opening words of our manual is that collection. We of course have created creeds and other statements of faith along the way, and all along the way we have always said that being unified as a denomination but being very diverse in how we live our lives; that’s what makes us faithful. It makes us strong. We are not a denomination that says pluralism must be stopped, we say pluralism is and then explore how shall we live.

This diversity and unity also allows us to be responsive. When I was in Quebec City, as far away as you really can be, culturally, from Fort McMurray, we heard about the fires and instead of thinking, “oh I hope they are all okay.” I could immediately, even if I hadn’t known her personally, emailed the United Church minister in Fort McMurray and say my prayers are with you, my thoughts are with you and I will email you in 30 days when you actually may know what we can do to help. And the United Church body had a pot ready to collect our monetary donations and it was safely kept until the people of Fort McMurray said this is what we need to use that money for. This is very different from an approach which would say: Oh, we know what you need. And as someone who lived through the Slave Lake fire it is amazing what some people think you need. (It’s just amazing.)

And so, the United Church of Canada’s breadth allows us to know people, but we are even wider than that. In all the founding traditions of our denomination we have people all over the world and they were doing what we call missionary work. (Another word like evangelism, that we have changed in how we do it, but it has always meant we go to a context and we listen.) And so, when we hear about a crisis of how many children die in childbirth in Africa we don’t need to say only: oh dear I hope that gets better. Instead our UCW women seek out and find a program that trains midwives so they can go back to their home towns and be midwives. And I don’t know what the number is, but there are now hundreds of trained midwives, trained in both their traditional ways and any other ways they wish to learn from the West, in their home communities, making differences in the infant and mother mortality rates.

And we always disagree in the United Church, we always try to do so in deep love. We have churches who turned away from being United in 1988 when we said all people, regardless of sexual orientation can be full members of the United Church and when they hear the call to Ministry, can go through the same processes as everyone else and become ministers.

We have churches who left earlier or later in our history depending on what was the current debate. We have these debates in a *conciliar* manner (which makes it sound peaceful, it’s not always peaceful) but what it means is all the voices are in the room. So, when all those easterners wanted to make a national statement about oil and pipelines they didn’t do it in a room by themselves; those people did it in a room with me and few other ministers from Alberta.

We also now include our Indigenous United Church folk in these conversations. We (strive) to no longer say: be like us and you can be one of us. We have learned, through their pain and

hardship, to say tell us please about your journeys of faith; tell us please how you already are the United Church of Canada and how we can learn from you. And none of this is easy. All of it, all of it is sacred.

Every time we try to close a door and someone pries it open it hurts. Then we hear who they are and where they are from and how God loves them and we are never the same again. And that door never gets closed again, but boy are we quick to go around the back and try to close another one. And God will find a way to open that one too.

And so, I pray as we celebrate this anniversary and as we celebrate this Pride Week, that all of us look into our lives. Who is there in your life who you have not heard from lately? Call them and ask them about their lives. Who is it that you haven't told about your life? Is there a way for you to call them up and share with them your faith journey? May God keep us ever uncomfortable while also reminding us everyday that we are most beloved.

Amen.