

“Is This Our Responsibility?”

Matthew 28:16-20

Trinity Sunday

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Westminster, Greenville

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We are concluding our spring sermon series this morning, “Then and Now: What does the early Church [back then] have to teach those of us in God’s Church right now?”

And our final topic is evangelism.

Truth be told, I tried to avoid this topic.

I’m thinking that maybe I should have wrapped this sermon series up last week.

Because evangelism is not my favorite topic.

The reasons are numerous.

For example, when I say the word “evangelism,” what comes to your mind?

I’ll tell you what comes to mine:

- People knocking on my door out of the blue, asking if I’ve been saved...
- Earnest Christians of another type and stripe handing out pamphlets to strangers on the corner of the street...
- Someone in the stands of a stadium holding up a sign that says John 3:16 as the football sails through the uprights...

None of that feels like faith that I can relate to...but the deeper reason for my discomfort with this word doesn’t come from strangers. It comes from friends.

When I was in elementary school, by two best friends happened to be Jewish. When I was in high school, my good friend on the cross-country team was Muslim.

My closest friends in college—
 who are lifelong friends to this day—
 have no religious faith, no belief in God.

And I have no interest in trying to CHANGE them.

If we ever talked about our different religious beliefs, it was from a place of curiosity, not conversion. I certainly did not believe, nor do I now believe, that God’s love and salvation is only available to those who practice the Christian faith or even limited to those who have some kind of faith.

The last thing I’ve wanted to do or felt called to do was try to EVANGELIZE my friends.

Our topic this morning is evangelism.
 I tried to avoid the topic.
 But I couldn’t avoid the topic.

Because even though I’ve spent a good portion of my life being confused and confounded by this word, evangelism is—at its root—
 not a bad word.

It’s a good word.

As Jonathan Merritt notes in a recent article about the history of Evangelicals in this country:

“The term *evangelical* derives from the Greek word *euangelion* meaning ‘gospel’ or ‘good news.’”

“The...word...was popularized in the first centuries...to distinguish the love-centric movement of Jesus followers from the violent Roman Empire that often made its own ‘good news’ announcements to celebrate military victories.”¹

So maybe the answer, when it comes to evangelism, is that we already know what to do with this word.

To be an evangelist is to have an announcement.

To share good news.

We just do it in quieter ways.

- As your bulletin cover notes, we average close to 40 baptisms each year around here!
- Just two weeks ago, over 30 confirmands were presented as the newest members of Westminster.
- And speaking of new members, in 2023, NOT counting our confirmands, Westminster welcomed over 80 new members into this church.

Are we spreading the good news?

Are we making disciples?

Can we count all that as evangelism?

All in favor of counting confirmation and baptisms and new members joining Westminster as our church’s expression of evangelism, let me hear an “Amen.”

Sounds like the motion passes.

¹ Jonathan Merritt, “Defining *Evangelical*,” The Atlantic, December 7, 2015, found at [What Does 'Evangelical' Mean? - The Atlantic](#).

Maybe I should say “Amen,” and give you the gift of a 5-minute sermon this morning.

All in favor?

I’m not putting that up for a vote.

You see, there’s still something that bothers me about our approach to this word...let me get at it like this.

A little over a decade ago, I heard the late Presbyterian pastor, Blair Monie, preach a sermon entitled, “Will Our Children Have Faith?”²

He addressed the anxiety that many parents in the pews have about whether their faith will STICK with their child. In other words, when their child grows up and is on their own, will they become a practicing Christian?

Will it be in the Presbyterian fold?

Will they join a church?

Or turn their back on the church?

And part of this worry makes good sense.

Because it comes from a place that recognizes one’s faith...as a precious gift.

None of us would be here were it not for someone else’s evangelism. Consider for a moment who passed the faith along to you. Who was it who announced—perhaps quiet ways, in a Sunday School classroom, or just by the model that they gave you—the good news of God’s love in Jesus Christ?

² The Rev. Dr. Blair Monie, “Will Our Children Have Faith?” preached at Preston Hollow Presbyterian Church, November 11, 2012.

I still remember the names of the Sunday School teachers who taught me when I was a little boy...Mrs. Morrow, Mrs. McCullum, Mrs. Taggart...how do I remember those names??!!

Do you see what we're talking about?
Faith itself isn't something we came to our own.

It wasn't our idea.
It was God's idea.

Which brings me to what bothers me about how EVANGELISM often gets described. As if passing along our faith—is something we can control.

Like it begins with us.
And gets carried out by us.
And if people are joining our church, it's all about us.

But *euangelion*—the good news of the gospel—never begins with us!

It always begins with God.
It's about God's activity and God's freedom and the gift of God's grace, alive and at work in the world.

Do you remember how Paul put it in our first text for today?

“I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.”

In her memoir *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion*, Sara Miles describes growing up with a mother who “nursed a grudge against Christianity for more than fifty years.”

Miles writes, “My parents never went to church—not on Easter, not at Christmas...Our Sundays were for reading the *New York Times* [and] listening to Vivaldi on the record player...”

When Miles became an adult, she took a job as a reporter for a politically left-wing magazine while living in San Francisco. Then one winter morning, while taking a walk, she found herself at St. Gregory’s Episcopal Church.

“I had no earthly reason to be there,” she writes.

“I’d never heard a Gospel reading, never said the Lord’s Prayer. I was certainly not interested in becoming a Christian—or as I thought of it rather less politely, a religious nut. But on other long walks, I’d passed the beautiful wooden building...and this time...on an impulse, with no more than a reporter’s habitual curiosity...I went in.”

Miles decided not just to watch, but to participate in the service, which was already in progress.

At the appropriate time, she went to the ALTAR with everyone else, and then, she says, something “outrageous and terrifying happened.”

Someone put a piece of bread in her hands, saying, “The body of Christ,” and passed her the goblet of wine, saying, “The blood of Christ.”

And then she writes:

“Jesus happened to me.”

“What I knew was happening—[was that] God, named ‘Christ’ or ‘Jesus,’ was real...[and it] utterly short-circuited my ability to do anything but cry...

It changed everything.”

And I was hungry for more...³

Friends, *we are not our own idea.*
We are God’s idea.

That’s not just what we see in Sara Miles’ life.
It’s what the first disciples learned about their lives.

According to our text from Matthew this morning, the risen Jesus appears to the 11 disciples on a mountain.

Some worshiped him. And some doubted.
And those doubts...DID NOT GET IN THE WAY OF GOD!

God took that mixture of confident faith and confused faith,
and God created God’s Church.

Put another way, a Presbyterian understanding of evangelism is NOT about what we can control...it’s about what we can never control, which is **the wild and reckless and untamable grace of the living God.**

A grace that promises to use us, and speak through us, in ways we can never plan or predict or foresee.

Do you know anything about God’s WILD grace?

³ Sara Miles, *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion*, New York: Ballantine Books/Random House, 2007. I am indebted Dr. Tom Long’s book, *Proclaiming the Parables*, for making me aware of this story.

We often think of grace as a gentle thing...like a hand on a head placed softly during a baptism...and many times, it is that.

But it's not ONLY that.

When our senior highs were on their mission trip to Memphis two summers ago, we spent an afternoon at the National Civil Rights Museum at the Lorraine Motel.

I had never been to the site where Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, and it was moving in numerous ways. One of the pictures at the museum was a photo I had never seen before.

It was of Will Campbell.
Do you know the name Will Campbell?

Will Campbell was Southern Baptist preacher.
Will Campbell was a close friend of Dr. King's.

And the photo showed Campbell standing on the balcony where King was shot, the night after his murder.

But it wasn't Will Campbell's friendship with King, or his support for the civil rights movement that I remember about him. It was also the way Campbell refused to give up on the very people who wanted Dr. King dead.

You see, Campbell also "worked the other side of the street, mingling with the racists and the Klansmen," and one day, after King was killed, that mingling brought Campbell to Parchman prison.

He went to Parchman to visit Tommy Tarrants—
"a tough and lanky young man in his middle twenties..."

sentenced to thirty years in prison for trying to bomb
the home of a Jewish merchant.”

Campbell talked with Tommy Tarrants.
And he listened to Tommy Tarrants, this member of the KKK.

And eventually, astoundingly, “after visits from Campbell and a handful of others who took an interest in his case, Tarrants began to change. He renounced his racism, proclaimed a newfound belief in the Christian faith, and got himself paroled.”⁴

Years later, he became President of the C.S. Lewis Institute.

Campbell takes no credit for it.

Conversions, he says, are not his calling.
What was his calling?
Campbell used to put it like this:

“If you love one, you gotta love ‘em all.”⁵

That, my friends, is what evangelism is about.
Not converting people.
Loving people.

And according to Jesus, if you love one child of God,
you gotta love ‘em all.

⁴ Frye Gaillard, “Appreciating Will Campbell, ‘Preacher to the Damned,’” The Progressive Magazine, June 5, 2013, found at [Appreciating Will Campbell, “Preacher to the Damned” - Progressive.org](#).

⁵ Hal Crowther, “Will David Campbell (1924-2013),” Oxford American, September 4, 2013, found at [Oxford American | Will Davis Campbell \(1924-2013\)](#).

As the theologian William Cavanaugh puts it:

“The church is only attractive when people can see...the poor Christ in it. The church should be...a window to God, not an object in itself.”⁶

Have you ever thought of evangelism that way?

That our evangelistic responsibility is not to convert people or control people or judge people...but to be USED by God as a window for other people to see through—

so that in a violent and polarized world,
God’s grace would become very clear?

After her experience at St. Gregory’s, Sara Miles became an active member of the congregation, and she started a ministry there. It’s a food pantry that provides free groceries every Friday in the very space where she herself had been fed by God’s startling and surprising grace.

But she also knew there was another place she needed to go to.
The place that belonged to her mother.
So one evening, she went to her mother’s apartment.

She didn’t go to convert her mother.
He just went to share what had happened to her.

So Sara Miles cooked a meal for the two of them, and they sat at the table to have supper, and Sara Miles said to her mother, “Ma, I have to tell you something...I’ve started going to church.”

Miles was nervous about telling her mother all this.

⁶ William T. Cavanaugh, “I had to learn to love the church,” *The Christian Century*, June 16, 2021, found at [I had to learn to love the church | The Christian Century](#).

Her mother, you see, had grown up the daughter of missionaries, and had rebelled against HER parents' faith. But at that dinner table, Sara Miles' mother did not judge her daughter for returning to the faith.

Instead, her mother listened to her, and then Miles' mother said:

“I told my mother when I was ten I didn't believe in God and I haven't ever since....I love the hymns, though...I bet I still know all the verses.”

And at that moment, Sara Miles remembered her atheist mother, when she—Sara—was a very young girl—singing those old hymns to her.

Do you think the wild and untamed grace of God could use Sara Miles' mother to plant seeds of faith in her daughter, seeds that would blossom and bear fruit 4 decades later?

Of that meal with her mother, Sara Miles described it as ‘a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, where none are left behind.’”⁷

Do you believe that's how the grace of God works in this world?
Doing everything possible to leave no one behind?

This is going to feel like a non-sequitur, but stay with me.

One of my favorite parts of this sanctuary is the stained-glass windows. They tell the story of God's grace at work through different people at different times, and without those people, none of us would be here today.

⁷ Miles, *Take This Bread*.

If you want to learn more about these windows, just look at the descriptions of them in the 200 hallway.

How many of you love these stained-glass windows?
They are beautiful.

But they are not the most beautiful windows in this room.

As William Cavanaugh put it, the church, at its best, is a window to Christ. Which means the most beautiful windows in this room...are sitting in these pews.

Because when I look at you, what I see is the extravagant, and gentle, and undomesticated grace of God at work.

This week, your responsibility is to be an evangelist.
Not by trying to convert someone or control someone or change someone.

Just let someone else see what I see right now.
Let someone else see that grace at work.
And don't leave anyone behind.

Amen.