

Evangelism: Sharing Our Story

Luke 4:14-21

Last Sunday, when I introduced this sermon series on “**Christian Language**”, I said that the purpose of the series was to “**reclaim**” – [to “**redeem**”, if possible] – some of the words of our faith that many of us feel have been “**high-jacked**” by the Religious Right, and that we no longer feel comfortable using. Last week I talked about the word “salvation” – as in “are you saved?”, “have you been saved?”, “have you accepted Jesus Christ as your Saviour?”

I said that, in part, I got the inspiration for this series from Marcus Borg in his book, “**Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power, And How They Can Be Restored**”. And I also said that it’s something that I, personally, have been committed to for years – [in sermons, study groups and one-on-one conversations with people about faith] –

- “**reclaiming**” Christian language in a way that is helpful and meaningful to us in the mainline, liberal church – giving people in the mainline church a language, a way to articulate (and feel confident about!) what we value and what we have to share;
- **OR**, in some cases, coming to the conclusion that some Christian words, some Christian language, has become so corrupted that it’s **beyond redemption**, and we have no choice but to “**let it go**”, and come up with a different way of expressing that idea. And that, of course, would not be “the end of the world”!

Anyway, enough about last week’s sermon – that was for the benefit of those of you who weren’t here last Sunday! This morning, I want to talk about another “dreaded word” – this time the dreaded E- word - “**evangelism**”.

Like the word “salvation”, “evangelism” (or even worse, the adjective “evangelical”) is **not** a word that ‘flows lightly off the tongue’ of most United Church people. **Why** this silence – [and its implied reluctance on our part] - to talk about “evangelism”?

Well, I'm guessing that the main reason is that many of us are uncomfortable with – [or maybe even appalled by] - the kind of evangelism we hear on the radio, see on TV, and observe on our street corners – **and we don't want IN ANY WAY to be associated with those kinds of people and that kind of activity:** evangelism that is interested only in the “personal salvation” of individual souls in the next world, and ignores – [or openly rejects] – any concern for “social justice” and “right relations” in this world...evangelism that has **no respect** for the sincere and strong beliefs of people of other faith traditions...evangelism that is **arrogant, intolerant, self-righteous and exclusive** in its claim that **only Christians** worship “the one true God”...and that God loves, helps and promises to “save” us Christians - **and nobody else!**

And so we leave evangelism to “**those other churches**” down the street and around the corner – you know, those churches that seem to go in “for that sort of thing”! But I think we need to take another look.

Margaret Atwood, in a short story called “**Scarlet Ibis**”, writes about Christine, who is on a trip to see these scarlet-coloured heron-like birds in Florida. On the way, she gets into conversation with a woman who tells her that she used to be a missionary. Atwood writes: *“Christine had been raised Anglican, but the only vestige of this was the kind of Christmas card she favoured: prints of mediaeval or renaissance old masters. Religious people of any serious kind made her nervous; they were like men in raincoats who might or might not be flashers. You would be going along with them in the normal way, and then there would be a swift movement and you would look down to find the coat wide open and nothing on under it but some pant legs held up by rubber bands! This had happened to Christine once in a train station”*.

Well, I acknowledge that it's a pretty outrageous thing to say that “evangelism” (or, at least, “bad” evangelism) is like being a flasher!!! So what did Atwood mean by that? Well, the action of the flasher in Atwood's story is **totally inappropriate** to the relationship...something that is **personal and private** is made **public**, and **cheapened**...something that should be **an expression of intimacy and trust** is used as **a form of violence**...the “victim” feels **violated and dehumanized**.

Now those are strong words – “*inappropriate, cheap, violent, violating and dehumanizing*”. **No wonder – [if that is even close to our experience] – that many liberal Christians resist the “E” word!**

I’m sure that some defenders of “traditional evangelism” would protest that **evangelism was never meant to be the way Atwood describes it**. Yet so much of the language around evangelism has overtones of aggressiveness (at the very least) and even, some would say, violence and objectification.

For example, people speak of such things as:

- “**Evangelistic crusades**” – as though evangelism were like **warfare**, with “unbelievers” as the enemy, or – at best – prisoners of war;
- “**Evangelistic tools**” – as though evangelism were an “**industrial process**” with “unbelievers” as the raw material to be made into “something else”, some acceptable “finished product”;
- “**Evangelistic strategies**” – as though evangelism were some kind of a “**marketing campaign**” with “unbelievers” as the “consumer”.

Another writer, Tsing Loh, recounts a similar story to Atwood’s, in her collection of stories “**Depth Takes a Holiday**”. It’s about 2 people on a first date. She writes: “*We were half way through a lovely Thai dinner; we had discussed the music of John Coltrane; we had discovered a common love of volleyball. Our faces were flushed. Lanterns swayed hypnotically. Grasping my hand, Jeff impulsively leaned forward. ‘Sandra?’ ‘What?’, I asked huskily. ‘Have you accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as your Saviour?’ Just like that. No warm-up. No mood music. No idle teasing around the God-issue to loosen the soil. Had Jeff grabbed my breast I would not have been more shocked!*”

Here is another writer who, like Atwood, turns to the language of “**sexual inappropriateness**” and being “**violated**” and “**objectified**” to describe how she felt at this sudden, clumsy effort at “evangelism”.

But there is something different about this story. Notice Sandra’s words: *there was “no warm-up...no mood music...no idle teasing around the God-issue”*. These words suggest that she (Sandra) is not opposed to talking about what she calls “the God-issue” at all! She implies that she would be happy to talk about “the God-issue” under different – [under more

appropriate] – circumstances...circumstances that would surely include values like **sensitivity, mutuality and respect.**

Unfortunately, whether we like it or not, “evangelism” is another of those good “religious” words that – [for many of us] – has become **so tainted and corrupted** that we’re embarrassed to even use the word – **and we certainly don’t want to use it to describe ourselves!** And so, as I see it, we have just 2 choices:

We can “let it go”, and just eliminate any mention of it from our faith vocabularies and theological conversations. Some have suggested that that is exactly what we should do!

John Bowen, an Anglican priest who teaches (taught?) at Wycliffe College here in Toronto, in his book “**Evangelism for Normal People**”, says that he, for one, “*would be happy to stop using the word ‘evangelism’ altogether*”.

Some, like Bowen, argue that if we just got rid of the word “evangelism”, we would have to find a **different** way – [a **better** way] – to describe what we mean by that activity. Sometimes, good words are just so “**damaged**”, so “**corrupted**”, that they’re **beyond redemption.**

So our first choice is to just “let it go” and let “them” – [those “other” people] – have the word and use it however they want – and we’ll just come up with a different way of describing what we mean by “evangelism” (which I’m coming to in a minute).

And of course the other way of dealing with this predicament is to re-claim the word “evangelism”, and to use it in our own way – a way that is (at the same time) true **both to the original meaning of the word **and** true to our values and convictions and theology.**

Which begs the question: “**What does the word ‘evangelism’ actually mean?**”

Well, to be all “technical” about it, I consulted 2 Bible dictionaries. Both define “evangel” (the noun) as “**good news, glad tidings, gospel**”, and an “evangelist” (the person) as “**a messenger of good news, glad tidings, gospel**”.

It's the word that Jesus himself uses when speaking in the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth. There, standing in front of his family and neighbours, he quotes Isaiah's ancient prophecy: ***"The Spirit of God is upon me, because God has anointed me to preach good news (the 'evangel') to the poor"***.

"Evangelism" – [at its most simple and basic, then] - simply means **"to share the good news"** – [no mention of "methodology" or "strategy" or "style"] – just **"sharing the good news"**.

People like Jim Wallis, one of the founders of the **"Sojourners"** community – [a strong social-justice based Christian community in the US] – have long delighted in describing themselves as **"liberal evangelicals"** or **"evangelical liberals"** (I forget which!). And, no, to them (at least), **that's not an oxymoron.**

John Saxbee, in his book **"Liberal Evangelism"**, describes "liberalism" as being about ***"openness, honesty, creative listening, hearing and responding in a world of cultural and religious diversity"***. Now I don't know if that's the best definition of "liberal" or not, but let's just say, for our purposes today, that that is our definition of "liberal" – and then move on to try to address the question: **"Well then, what does 'liberal evangelism' look like?"**

1) Well, first of all, **"liberal evangelism"** is an evangelism that listens **before it talks** – it puts **hearing ahead of speaking**. (*I know, what a concept, right?*)

But this is significant, because all too often, evangelism has acquired a bad name precisely because **it has been much more about speaking/talking/preaching/proclaiming than it has been about listening....than it has been about getting to know people....than it has been hearing about their experiences....than it has been about learning about the context, the struggles and the reality of their daily lives.**

A couple of months ago, I read a review of a book called **"Leaving the Witness: Exiting a Religion and Finding a Life"**, the biography of the author Amber Scoriah who – [as the title suggests] – grew up in the Jehovah's Witness community, then made a choice to leave it. I bought the book on Friday, so haven't had a chance to read much of it, but I did come

across this telling statement: “I had spent almost all of my free time for my entire adult life talking about my religion, but rarely had I ever listened to anyone else on the same topic”.

Well, there’s the problem right there, isn’t it? **Talking, talking, talking.....but never listening.**

What a far cry this is from the responsiveness of Jesus as portrayed in most of the gospel accounts of his ministry! Jesus’ responses are **almost always tailored to the needs, the context, the particular circumstances of those who came to him for healing – or simply for a “hearing”.**

2) Secondly, hearing before speaking affects not only the way we respond, but the actual content of our response.

In liberal evangelism, the content of the good news itself may be **changed** by our encounter with the “other” – **IF we have really listened, and IF we have really paid attention, and IF we have really heard what they’re saying.**

For example, through our encounters with other people **we see things in Scripture that we had not seen before.**

- Reading feminist theologians for example, has helped some of us to read Scripture in a different way and to actually change the gospel we proclaim.
- In a similar way, listening to Latin American liberation theologians has revealed to us a gospel “**biased in favour of the poor**” which perhaps we had not seen before – or had chosen not to see before.
- Being exposed to the work of gay and lesbian theologians and really listening to **their** voices has alerted us to the **radical inclusiveness** of the gospel which we may have missed.

So “liberal evangelism” recognizes that – [in listening before we speak] – **the actual content of the good news we proclaim may be changed!** And so the “liberal evangelist” sees the gospel as **something “yet-to-be-discovered”** – [not as a “one-size-fits-all”, “ready-to-wear” garment] - but as a garment requiring alterations and adjustments.

3) Coming out of this is a third characteristic of “liberal evangelism” – our responses are culturally and historically and personally SPECIFIC – in other words, “context” is always significant! What is “good news” in one time and place may not be “good news” in another time and place. In any given historical situation, some aspects of the Gospel will come into focus as specifically related to the needs of that time and place, that situation.

When we really engage with those whose experience of faith is very different from ours, we find not just new ways of saying the same thing – we may actually find **new things to say** about God and our lives of faith. **Every generation has to discover and re-discover the Gospel for itself.**

And so our attentiveness to **CONTEXT** is essential to the formulation of a gospel for our time. This is the third characteristic of “liberal evangelism” – **a readiness to be surprised – an openness to being challenged - by the new faces of Christ in our world today.**

As a liberal, I don’t think that I’m quite ready to let go of the word “evangelism” – not yet. Like Jim Wallis, **I would like to claim both words for myself**, even though they seem to “fit kind of awkwardly” and certainly don’t “flow easily off the tongue”.

The truth is - **I don’t want to be silent about my faith - I don’t want to be silent about what I value - I don’t want to be silent about what it is I’m most passionate about and committed to.** But, at the same time, I **do** want to be respectful of others – and for them to be respectful of me.

My faith is important to me. I’m a cradle-United Church person...a Christian from birth...I’ve never not been part of the Christian church...my faith has seen me through some very difficult times...it has also been tried and tested...de-constructed and re-constructed...it’s a work-in-progress, for sure...*and it may not be pretty, but it’s mine.*

The time and place to share that, I think, is **in a relationship where there is already established an element of respect and mutuality and trust – where there is an openness to listening as well as talking – an interest in hearing the stories of others, as well as sharing my own – with no “secret strategies”, no “hidden agendas”, no “ulterior motives”.**

“Evangelism” calls us to a life of openness, vulnerability, wholeness and love. And I want that – for myself and for my church.
Thanks be to God!

Resources: “Liberal Evangelism”, by John Saxbee
“Evangelism for ‘Normal’ People”, by John Bowen
“Bluebeard’s Egg”, by Margaret Atwood
“Depth Takes a Holiday: Essays from Lesser Los Angeles”,
by Tsing Loh

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