

Year B, Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 9)

July 4, 2021

The Reverend Dr. Brent Was

“He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two.”

Good morning, everyone! We’ve had a lot of people at church the past few weeks. More than usual for this time of year. I’ve been thinking about this a lot. Why do you think so many people have been around?

It has been a year! It is still going on, COVID, these variants, consternation about vaccine hesitancy, our political situation is still far from normal and is far less than stable, issues of race and gender and sexuality are very live, the heat this past week, especially in the Pacific Northwest, has propelled climate concerns to the front of everyone’s minds (or it should).

When I look around this room, and see the smiling faces, hear the booming voices, witness the happy reunions of people who missed each other due to the pandemic, I see all sorts of reasons that church is so full. I, and I know a lot of you, need this. Like everything you said, we need to be with each other after the long loneliness of COVID isolation, we need to celebrate, something (surviving a pandemic is a fantastic thing to celebrate), we need to nurse our wounds... being fearful or stressed for months on end leaves marks. The pandemic certainly did, so did the

election. So we need the solace, the healing balm of church, and we need strength for the journey. We need to replenish our wells from the source of Light and Life, Jesus Christ. We need the familiarity of rituals that have held us throughout our lives, or that we have only recently discovered, the mystery of the Sacraments cures so much of what ails us and our world. We need to sing together.

Jesus knows all of this, that the world is hard. And that there is relief to our fear and suffering. I love this gospel story, His neighbors giving Him a hard time: “They took offense at him.” It is not as bad as in St. Luke’s telling where they try to throw Him off a cliff, but still, His home town rejects Him. So what does He do? He was in a tumultuous time, historically, His ministry was new, and not uncontroversial, (it would lead to His gruesome death – the stakes were high). And what does He do? What his His answer to rejection and violence and stress and, by conventional wisdom a mediocre to failed ministry, what does He do? “He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two.” What was it that He was calling for? What do we call it? Evangelism.

The word “evangelism” simply means spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ. (Gospel is Greek for *Good News*). Evangelism doesn’t mean recruiting, or converting, or convincing or selling anything, it means telling the Good News of Jesus Christ, telling others about the God that you know, and how your life has been (and theirs could maybe be) made better by that relationship. All the reasons why we are here this morning, it is telling people about them.

I need what we have here. A lot of you need what we have here. Are we unique in that need? Especially in this moment? Of course not. A lot of people need what we have here. Evangelism is making that connection.

Remember, each of us is here because at some point, someone evangelized us or an ancestor, and not always at the point of a spear. Yes of course, evangelism has earned a very bad rap, and not undeservedly. We've all been accosted by folks in sandwich boards at the farmer's market, or earnest people knocking on our door at inopportune times. But just because other people do it wrong or at least not how we would ever consider doing it, doesn't mean that the whole concept is corrupted.

I truly believe that the fate of the world rests in part in the good and loving news of Jesus Christ getting out there, changing people, helping them. Helping them to see that their individual interests are not more important than our collective interests. Helping them to see that love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, you know, the fruits of the spirit, are important, are the most important qualities to have and practice. We need, especially now, we **NEED** to join together around beautiful, good, love-filled things. Evangelism is about helping people come into relationship with God and into relationship with others who also seek a relationship with the ground of being itself. Talk about good news. If you believe that that is what we are up to here, seriously, how could you hide it under a bushel? How could you not share it?

Ok. Maine is one of the six least churchied states (with the other New England states – minus Rhode Island – and Oregon). There are lots of reasons why we don't share it. But we need to reframe that. (Maybe this is like the thorn in the side that Paul is talking about. The discomfort we feel in sharing our faith is maybe good for us). We need to evangelize not because the big "C" Church will die if we don't spread the word (though it will). We need to evangelize, not because this church will wither slowly away and die, though it will. The church is not the end. It is a sloppy, sometimes tone-deaf means to an end. We need to evangelize, to spread the Good News, because our world in this post-pandemic, red v. blue, epic heat wave moment, can go a lot of ways. Some possible futures are good, some are distinctly not. What we need is more people immersed in, or at least exposed to the Love of Jesus Christ and the moral heart that enlivens and guides your life so that 1. They can better weather the storms that are coming; and 2. Can maybe get out in front those storms, can be compassionate solvers of problems, faithful resolvers of conflict, divinely inspired lovers of souls.

We have something really good here that is worth sharing. No, it is not right for everyone, but it's kind of presumptuous to decide for someone else what is good for them or not, isn't it? Can we agree that it is good to spread the love of God in the world, and even to invite others into that love. OK? The question is how. It is summer on the coast of Maine and it is usually a bit too breezy to use sandwich boards...

The Rev. Canon Steve Bonsey was one of my priests at the cathedral in Boston. He wrote a wonderful little pamphlet called “A Shy Person’s Guide to the Practice of Evangelism.” He really hits the main-line reluctance to evangelize on the head. He wrote, “Let’s pretend that you are someone who might be willing, in theory, at some point, possibly, to consider maybe doing something that, while not ‘evangelism’ –type evangelism, still could be in some way construed as a sort of sharing of hope. Kind of.” Can you see yourself in there at all? According to Fr. Steve, it is estimated that the average Episcopalian invites someone to church once every 27 years! And he pleads with us, “Friends, with the grace of God and a little self-confidence, we can cut this figure in half!” Twenty-seven years is tongue and cheek, but you get the point. And when was the last time *you* invited someone to church?

The starting point in that pamphlet for doubling the invitation rate to once every 13 ½ years is a three-step process. Step 1. Love God. Step 2. Love your neighbor. Step 3. Think about getting the two of them together. That’s it. That is evangelism. That is spreading the good news. Nothing more. Nothing less.

But how do you do that? It can feel hard, invasive, even. The gospel, that’s about faith. My faith is personal, thank you very much. It is private. We get along here precisely because we don’t talk about such things; that’s Fr. Brent’s job. And so many of us were raised with the lesson that in polite company we don’t speak of sex, politics, money or religion. Any of those excuses sound familiar?

The church is relationship, loving relationship. That is what we have to offer and that is what we are inviting people into. The doctrine, the teachings, the Bible and Mass and all of that, like Archbishop Rowan Williams tells us, that comes later, that's the form, not the content. The content is the love-steeped universe revealed in Jesus Christ. And that really does sell itself. The form, no, it is not for everyone, but you would be amazed what people acclimate to when what is at the end of the rainbow is so very, very good like what we have here. But you still need to say something, and a lot of us are very uncomfortable talking about our faith, we might not even know what we believe. But that is ok. You don't need to know what you believe to be a good and honest Christian, or to invite someone to come and see what the good news is all about. So here are a few gentle steps suggested by Fr Steve to begin to spread the good news.

So you know someone, or you meet someone that maybe you'd like to go to church with, or you sense could use some of the medicine the church has to offer. The first thing you need to do is establish a relationship that has the first inklings of Jesus in it. So how about asking how someone is, how they are right now. Maybe say, "How are you doing?" (And want to know). You may already know them very well, family level of knowing, and know that they have things going on, or maybe they are a co-worker that you don't know, or someone at the gym or club, or a parent at school. Whomever. The point is, evangelism starts by making a caring connection. Make it clear that you know them and love them for their own sake. That's how God loves us, right? That is very,

very good news that everyone wants to feel. And if it goes no further than that, that is totally fine. The Gospel has been spread!

That's it, opening relationship. As a relationship develops, do as relationships do, go a little deeper. Tell them that you'll pray for them. (If you will). Don't do it in some pious or self-righteous way, but just tell people you will hold their joys and concerns and bring them to the God you know and love. I say that all the time to the most unlikely characters, unchurched, seemingly unchurchable, and the reaction is uniformly positive. Don't you like it when someone say that to you?

Another passive or gentle evangelism technique is to make proper and frequent use of the word "AMEN." Anything can become a prayer when capped with a heartfelt Amen, a wish, a hope, a concern a belief. Churching it up a bit makes helps to demonstrate that God's attention is everywhere. It contextualizes it and you in relation to your faith and your practice of your faith.

Another minor linguistic move Fr. Steve suggests is to substitute the idiom "Thank God!" with the slightly more formal "Thanks be to God!" That tiny change can really bring attention to what is actually being said, "God is revealed and praised as the One who has acted."

That's it. That is the practice of evangelism. Initiating relationships in the context of your faith. Now in my experience, you start putting subtle church stuff out there (and don't worry, what we Episcopalians have to offer is pretty subtle), people are curious. "Hey, I like this person. Never would have pegged them as a Christian. Hmm..." or "Wow, what a

nice guy. He's gonna pray for me? Hmm..." Or "St. Francis? I have heard good things about that place. Hmm..." It's that "Hmmm..." that you're looking for. Hmmm... It all starts there. My journey into Christ was very much "Hmm..." led as I first encountered the Eucharist. "I don't know what is going on here, but hmmm..." That doesn't sound so bad, does it?

Now there are some do's and don'ts that Fr Steve suggests that I think are helpful.

On the Don't side, you might not want to say

- You are a sinner condemned to hell – unless you take advantage of this limited time offer.
- You look wayward and lost. I bet you could use a church community.
- Our church is tolerant of all kinds. Even people like you!
- They told me to invite someone to church and you are the only person I could think of who isn't busy on Sundays.
- Church would be less boring if you were there. (That is actually not bad).
- And if someone does come and check us out, you might not want to accost them in the coffee line with a "vampire" statement:
"Are you new? Fabulous. The vestry could use some new blood. Are you a money person?"

On the do side, here are some suggestions:

- Wow, you are a tenor! Our choir would love you.

- You do so much for others. Do you have a place you go to be fed?
- You always ask the tough questions. You'd be great at our adult ed classes.
- That's a lovely iguana. Have you ever been to a blessing of the animals?
 - Or one quite relevant right now: Whew, the pandemic was hard. My church community really helped me get through it. You want to check it out with me?

None of those things sound too hard to say, do they? There is no creepy-Christian vibe there, is there? They seem to me to be about what we do here and what folks need, even if they haven't considered that they need it.

Fr. Steve sums it up with the very simple statement, "Evangelism is the sharing of a precious gift." I believe that St. Francis by the Sea, this constellation of relationships, is precious gift. You are here for some reason, and likely it is a very good one. Others have reasons too. And I don't know about you, but I didn't know that St. Francis existed until someone told me about it. Most don't know that churches like this exist anywhere, where hearts and minds not only can be open, but are basically required to be for admittance.

So I encourage you to begin to sort of consider that maybe you possibly could perhaps say something to someone some day about church. Maybe. You never know, it could save someone's life. It saved mine.

Maybe it saved yours. And maybe all of our lives depend on the light of Christ shining more brightly and more frequently in this beautiful and fragile world. Thanks be to God. AMEN.