

Evangelism – Eeeek!

Susan Golian

I am an intensely uncomfortable evangelist so it is no surprise that God, and Chip, in their infinite wisdoms, decided to ask me to be the co-chair (with the magnificent Vicki Ronaldson) of this church's board of "Christian Evangelism." And I'm lying when I say I'm miserable about evangelizing: a more accurate description is that I am miserable at the thought of "doing" unto others the kind of evangelism that has so often been "done" unto me.

If you've ever been overweight you know exactly how effective it is when someone starts with, "You have such a pretty face, Dear; if only you would..." If you've ever been in a grocery store with a two-year old who is in full-frontal tantrum and someone says, "Well, if that was *my* child I would..." If you've ever driven with your husband and, as you turned onto the boulevard packed with cars, he says, "*I* never come this way it's always jammed – why didn't you..." you have an idea just how wrong evangelism can go when the "evangelizer" is flying solo.

My own mother, before she became an evangelical, fundamentalist whose faith was just this side of holy-rolling, left the family when I was 3. I grew up with the hole the size of Arkansas in my heart that parental abandonment leaves. My recurring nightmare when Talia was a baby was that I would die before she could remember me or know that I didn't leave her on purpose, leaving her with that same hole in her own heart. My mother was visiting us when Talia was 2 or 3 and I told her about this terrible fear. My now very "Christian" mother, suddenly in possession of the perfect "entry point," proceeded to "evangelize" me by telling me that if I wasn't saved and Talia and I died together, I'd go to hell and Talia would go to heaven – and God would erase all memory of me from her so she wouldn't suffer any sorrow in heaven! Oh no! Not just abandonment but **ETERNAL** abandonment!

Another, more recent evangelism attempt inflicted on me happened in the 99cent store. I came upon those tall, Mexican "Saints" candles. They have fascinating pictures of saints silkscreened on side of the tall glass jar with the name of, and a prayer to, that saint on the other side. I recognized a couple of the saints right off: Saint Sebastian is pretty unmistakable, as is the Virgin of Guadalupe, but the rest of them were quite a challenge for me and my rapidly decaying Spanish. I was enjoying the exuberant artwork and the quirky typesetting when a couple came down the aisle and the man loudly quoted John 3:16 at me and, as he strode off, tossed back, "You'll only receive salvation through the blood of Jesus Christ, you know!" in a condescending tone over his shoulder at me.

What on earth did he expect that to do to me? Cause me to suddenly "see the light" right then and there – be slain in the spirit because his sledgehammer words had broken through to my hardened heart, causing me to back away from idolatry and be truly **SAVED!!!** Run after him, kneel at his feet in the aisle and implore him to teach me the "right" way to God because I wanted to be just like him? Yeah. Right. Sure. Actually, maybe that's exactly what I should have done, if only in the spirit of guerilla street theater.

One of the major challenges we who would evangelize face is cleaning up after careless, coercive Christians – you know...the ones who are busy putting the "mess" into "Messiah!"

The reason, I believe, these Christians become so coercive is fear: they really, truly believe that the unsaved will burn in hell for all eternity if they don't do their bit. They're also pretty sure they've got a quota to fill! (Well, they do, but it's a lot smaller, and way more difficult to meet, than many Christians believe it is!) Never mind the idea that a truly loving God will never require

eternal punishment for temporary, temporal error. Never mind that God's grace as revealed by The Christ isn't like liver or tofu or castor oil – something good-for-you that has to be either sneaked into, or forced down the throat of, the “savee.” Never mind that we evangelizers don't save the souls! God, and God alone, does the power lifting.

So how *does* one evangelize?

It starts with Prayer (anybody here surprised by that?).

I believe with all my heart that when I pray in the morning and tell God He gets me and my whole day to do with what He will, it includes evangelizing. ***But it only includes evangelizing on His terms, not on mine.*** However hard I try on my own, I just stagger around blindfolded in a dark room with broken glass and sleeping people on the floor: one false move and either they get hurt or I do. God, with His Holy Spirit, is my only flashlight in the otherwise impenetrable gloom. I have to keep on reminding myself that I'm not saving the soul – God is saving the soul. I'm just inviting the soul to come to the party!

It's not about summarily dismissing other people's faith – if they're in connection with God and His Holy Spirit through their faith, they don't *need* our message – they're already there (I'm not going to tell the Dalai Lama he's going to hell because he's not a Christian! Talk about an old wineskin!). It's about being in touch with the Holy Spirit, however you get there! Given that you are here this morning, I'm guessing you got “there” by the same route I did – by the mercy and grace of God as revealed by Jesus the Christ. Only people who recognize that they are not in touch with God through their current faith are going to be able to hear the message – they are old wineskins, yes, but they are anxious to shed that skin because it no longer fits them, no longer serves their need to reach God. They are ready to “convert,” and only they know who they are and only they know when they are ready. Just think of the insurance salesman who wants to sell you insurance before you have the car, or the house, or the family to protect. An utter, complete waste of time!

The second step to evangelizing is Preparation. For me, that means reading my bible every day and attending my bible study. A familiarity with what's really in the bible, and what isn't, and what the stuff that *is* there means, is extremely important. I can't think of any other book that's been more misunderstood, borrowed from, more twisted to every selfish purpose than The Holy Bible.

I have had to develop a healthy picture of what God is like. Like many people I had an utterly “schizophrenic” view of God – well, yes, He is all loving and all forgiving (but he just can't wait to catch me being in the wrong and spank me good); Jesus loves me yes I know (but he who is not with me is against me and will burn in hell, hell I tell you!!!). Man, no wonder people are so afraid to open the door – they don't know which god they're going to get: the lady or the tiger! It's also not surprising that we can't easily come up with a coherent picture of God the Father because we, consciously or unconsciously, use our own father figures when we grapple with the concept of God the Father and they weren't necessarily coherent! Hmmm...maybe I didn't mean that to come out the way it did...let me think...No, that's right. It's all about reconciling the image of the Old Testament God with the God as revealed by Jesus the Christ (and by the way, don't feel too badly if you think you're not doing a good enough job of this: God's own personal pick for this job did such a good job of it himself that they nailed him to a cross!).

Are you able to tell people about a loving, caring God? What is that God doing when small children suffer? When earthquakes & tsunamis & floods & fires destroy lives and livelihoods? Why do the wicked prosper while the faithful struggle? And why don't the faithful get angry

about that? What kind of God is this, anyway and His followers must be some kind of crazy! And let's don't even start about that scary "Wrath of God" business...

Having an easy-to-grasp theological framework that touches on these very real, very puzzling and painful contradictions is hugely important and I couldn't have come up with mine if I hadn't spent the last several years in prayer and in my bible study. By the way, mine will always be a work in progress, so I welcome input and discussion.

Another part of preparation is having my story, or my testimony, ready to share. Wow – was I excited when I heard about that part. YES!!! I get to talk about ME!!! Everyone wants to know all about ME!!! And I started writing and I wrote and I wrote and I wrote...polishing each word, honing each phrase...entirely oblivious to the fact that most people really aren't all that interested in MEEEEEE!!!

Most people, when you get right down to it, are actually much more interested in...themselves! Who knew? So after a very gentle friend reminded me of that inescapable fact, I whittled my story down to just a few of sentences (OK, they're really good sentences, but honestly, there're only 6 of them now). I could expand it if I needed to, but I think it's much more important that I listen. Not unlike when I pray.

So now I've prayed and I've prepared. Now what? Now comes the **REALLY, REALLY** hard part: waiting. Waiting for it to be right. But what does "right" feel like?

When I was a teenager I had a wonderful bicycle, a nicked and battered green 10-speed. It's the only bike I've ever had that behaved like the proverbial "well-oiled machine," and I loved it. I remember riding one beautiful fall afternoon, and, while I don't remember exactly where I was going, I'll guess it was the mall (remember, I *was* a teenaged girl!). I was traveling north and had to make a turn to the west, which meant crossing the 2 crosswalks of one intersection. I rode sitting upright, not touching the handlebars, just steering with my balance. Instead of having to stop and wait at the crosswalks, I caught the first half of the turn just as the light was changing from green to yellow and then caught the 2nd half of the turn just as the light was turning from red to green, so I never had to stop, never had to touch the brakes or the handlebars at all. I just slalomed through that intersection in the slanting sunlight, my long, long hair waving behind me like a pennant in the breeze, and experienced one transcendent moment of sheer physical, athletic bliss, of being poetry, and music, in motion. I have never forgotten that feeling of pure...rightness is the best word I have come up with to describe it. I was powerful and graceful...oh, wait...GRACEful. Graceful. How interesting! I felt full of grace. It is that feeling of GRACEfulness that I want to experience when I evangelize. If it doesn't leave me feeling so perfectly "in the right place at just the right moment" then I am driving the evangelism bicycle, not God, and I'm not likely to be full of grace!

So we wait for the moments of grace, but while we wait, we live. It's best if we live as Christians. This can be tricky, but I'll share a few of the things I've figured out since I've started being a Christian.

Remember that part about loving your neighbor as yourself? I've given it up. It's virtually impossible - ESPECIALLY if I get behind the wheel of my car.

However, if I'm wearing my cross then people will judge The Christ by the way I behave. And if you think I'm kidding, just think about how you judge parents by the way their children behave! So I try to love (or at least kindly put up with) the neighbors. Even when we're all behind the

wheels of our cars! No rolling of the eyes, no long honking, no “well, if you hadn’t just gotten your driver’s license out of a Cracker Jacks box” huffs, and if I wave, I must use ALL 5 of my fingers!!! AT THE SAME TIME!!! The most amazingly Christian woman I ever met was the lady whose car I tapped while parallel parking at the airport. I jumped out of my car, all full of grovel and apology and she just waved airily and said, “Honey, why do you think they call ‘em bumpers?”

So I try to live like a Christian – I try to not make promises I can’t keep, I try to not be unkind or judgmental or impatient; I try to smile, hold doors, yield right-of-way and remember that I can’t know how awful someone else’s life might be at any given moment, so I try to treat other people gently. I don’t always succeed, but I do try. And I try because I am walking around on God’s time, available for God’s business, and I don’t want people to think badly of God or Jesus or all Christians because I act like a jerk.

While we play nice and wait for our moment, we look for the entry points: events or times in people’s lives that give them a natural door to come into a relationship with God. They are the openings in protective shells we build to keep out the grace, the mercy and the love of God.

The happiest entry point of all is the birth of a child. Our hearts are softened and filled with gratitude when a child enters our lives. We are overwhelmed with wonder, staggered by mysterious generosity of God – asking ourselves over and over again, “What on earth did I do that was good enough to deserve this?” The answer is, of course, nothing; for what we do is never enough to earn God’s grace. His grace is always, and forever, a gift.

Great joy...or great despair – both pierce us to, and through, the heart. The healthy, the well-adjusted, the wealthy can be so well-insulated by their good fortune that often they have no need of a god – they can do it all on their own, thank you very much, and they’re doing a darn fine job of it. But God always tries to reach them; knock, knock, knocking on the doors of their hearts, and sometimes they can hear an empty, reverberating clang deep within. Now *that*, my friends, is an entry-point!

But how do you, the waiting evangelist, know when they’ve heard the clanging emptiness inside? Sometimes you can literally see it in their eyes, but it’s great when The Holy Spirit whispers into your heart’s ear and you find yourself suddenly in the middle of a conversation about longing or meaning or even, Heaven Forbid!, **GOD** and can’t for the life of you figure out how you got there.

I’ve only had two such experiences, and they were magical. They both happened at work even though I know full well that it’s completely against the rules for me to “talk God” at work. However, it is also quite clear to me that my boss hasn’t explained that particular rule to God. (And, frankly folks, I can’t *wait* to hear how that comes out!)

The first time it happened I was chatting with a lovely and charismatic woman who was there with her young daughter. I cannot tell you what happened, because I have no idea. All I know is that one moment we were talking about our children and schools and the next moment I was sharing about our church and our “take” on the Christian way and she was telling me how she longed for a church with exactly that message. I invited her to our church and she came just once...but I kept her in my heart. I dreamed of her every so often, her name would pop into my head at odd moments and I just held her in my heart. After a couple of years, I ran into her again at work and she said she was ready to come to our church! And she, and her husband and daughter actually came! Wasn’t that evangelizing?

The second time was just over a year ago: I was sitting across my desk from a movie-star handsome man with impossible turquoise eyes, a deep tan, wavy black hair swept back up off his perfect GQ face, all elegant and assured in his exquisitely tailored suit, power tie and polished wingtips. And he was wooing me. Well, OK, he was wooing my insurance business, but he was still in full woo and it was wonderful. He was beautiful, articulate, successful and...miserable. I don't know how I knew it, but I did. Flat-out miserable. Suddenly, before I even knew I was going to say it (*I love how I have to sneak up on myself!*) I blurted out, "You're really very unhappy, aren't you?"

Then the worst possible thing happened: his eyes filled with tears! I was horrified, and perhaps so was he! We wound up talking about his deep, deep fear of God; about how he was afraid to ask for what he wanted because he just might get it – and just look at how unhappy he was now that he'd gotten everything else he'd ever asked for! I remembered that he'd mentioned a young son (Listening!) and I asked him if his son asked him for something to eat, would he give his son a stone? If his son asked him for a toy would he give his son a scorpion or a snake? (Preparation!) And then I told him about the Daddy God who loves him even better than he loves his own son. Wasn't that evangelizing?

Remember I mentioned a quota earlier? My favorite interpretation comes from when Jesus sent out His 12 and told them to bring back 72. That was just 6 converts for each disciple. That's all The Christ was asking from the disciples He hand-picked and trained. Just 6. So I don't think it's unreasonable to think that God will be simply thrilled with us if we love just 6 people into relationship with Him over the entire course of our lives. And I'm pretty sure we don't even have to really love 6 people into the club – I'm sure we just have to be prepared and show up willing and ready every day. If God can put us in the path of 6 people who are ready to hear and we are obedient, then we'll get to evangelize; if there aren't 6 people who are ready to hear I don't think God's going to count it against us. The important thing is *we* show up, ready and willing.

Aside from learning that I only need to reach 6 people of the course of my life, the other most "freeing" thing I've learned is that I'm not saving the souls. That's God's job. And, if you believe as I do that, "If Grace is True Then *Every* Soul Will Be Saved," it takes all the pressure off. We don't have to threaten, trick or browbeat – we just have to love, and be loveable, in God's name and invite people to the party, *when God tells us to*. So how hard is that?

When I was a kid there was a boy down the block who had a swimming pool. Every once in a while his mom would invite all the kids in the neighborhood over to swim. It was wonderful – we would fly down the street with our towels flapping, tugging our suits on as we ran.

That's what evangelism should feel like – it's an invitation to a joyous, fun, happy, comfort- and love-filled life – it's friends and milk and cookies and crystalline blue swimming pools on hot, hot days. We're not saving immortal souls: that's God's job. We're inviting them to the pool party, into The Kingdom that's right in the here and the now, not in the hereafter. This means the stakes are not nearly so enormous. If we can remember that then it's possible to invite them without coercion, without threats, without manipulation.

Whoever heard someone say on a scorching August afternoon, "If you don't come swim in my pool you will burn in hell forever?" Shoot, we're already in hell – it's 104 degrees outside and we're being given the chance to frolic in the cool, blue water! Now that, my friends, *that* is the heart and soul of Evangelism!