

I suppose it might be a close contest if we decided to take a vote as to whether people are more bothered by sermons on tithing (last time I preached) or being an evangelist (this morning.) Not that we're going to vote on the matter: I'm simply refreshing your memories as to those disciplines which help shape our capacity to be obedient and effective disciples of our Lord Jesus. And as to how no discipline makes any sense if we don't care about the goal. Who wants to practice the scales at the piano the way Rodger did for years and years if you don't care about playing it beautifully? Who would put up with the rigors of boot camp if you weren't convinced there was a very important deployment for which you were being trained?

No doubt about it: many liberals suffer a reflexive reaction even to the word "evangelism," as if I were scratching my fingernails down a blackboard. You know some of the reasons: too often those claiming to be "evangelists" for Christ do more harm than good for His cause—perhaps by garbling His message of love into a tirade of threats and fear, or by treating their hearers with less respect than Jesus treats us. People who have not yet come Home to Jesus are not evil, not stupid, not hard of hearing. They're just where each of us used to be. And the Holy Spirit is never through with them.

But this morning I'm sticking with aversion therapy: we're not going to cede this discipline of "evangelism" simply because some have misunderstood, or understand it differently from how we do. It's easy to criticize those who are not doing perfectly what I am not trying to do at all. I suppose all of us striving to live as disciples of our Lord Jesus—liberal or conservative, reticent or bold—might benefit from hearing what He has to tell His Church about evangelism.

To Jesus, the idea of "evangelism" is a very good thing. Indispensable, in fact, to His cause and His mission. (If you subtract the prefix, you might note the word "angel" right in the middle of the word. An "angel" is a messenger from God; an "evangelist" is likewise a messenger of "the good message;" anyone who proclaims the good news of the Kingdom of God is an evangelist.)

Matthew tells us that Jesus' first action in His public ministry is to choose His disciples—those whom He will empower and teach and deploy for God's mission: as we heard, two brothers, two fishermen, Peter and Andrew. Jesus invites them, very simply: "Come, follow Me, and I will now make you become fishers for people..." (More accurately translated, "Come, and keep on living the life of following Me...") They respond, very simply: "At once they left their nets behind and followed Him." Their nets and their catch and their fish and their profits and their livelihood.

Jesus continues down the beach of the Sea of Galilee, next inviting James and John to follow Him. They not only leave their nets behind but also the boat and their father, Zebedee. Something about Jesus causes these grown men who own their own business to leave everything behind to become disciples of this Jesus. In fact they leave their own father behind. (This account is so abbreviated it contains only one sure theme: they have met Jesus, and they believe they will be gaining more than they will be losing if they join in the life obeying Him.)

This Jesus offers an odd sales pitch, an odd campaign promise, doesn't He? "Vote for Me, if you're willing to give up whatever is most dear to you so far, and the first and main thing I'll do is get you to go out and bring other people into My

Movement.” Nothing about what’s in it for you, nothing about personal benefits or advantages received—not at first, anyway. (Any other candidates out there for the Messiah? And while we’re using aversion therapy this morning, this is a good time to note that the summary of Jesus’ entire message, His “gospel,” is boiled down to this: “Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven has come near.” [v 17]) When you think about it, a unique Candidate for Messiah—God’s own Son—would most likely have a unique mission and a unique campaign. Jesus certainly has.

Jesus chose a daring and different approach: to change a few people a lot, not a lot a little. The common approach, even today, is to blast catchy soundbytes to influence a lot of people at least a little, and from the outside in. Jesus did it all backwards: to change a few people a lot, and from the inside out. (If you are one of His disciples, guess what: He has called you to be changed a lot, and from the inside out.) And His disciples are the only ones He ever calls upon to do the heavy lifting of His Kingdom work. Whom else could He trust? Whom else could He send? Whom else does He have?

It’s just sinners like us, people trying to make our own way in the world until His Spirit interrupted and drew us to Him and captured us, won us over, questions and curiosities and defenses still at the ready. By His Spirit, by our dawning awareness of His love continuing to reach out for us—by one degree and another—He keeps winning each one of us. (Nothing personal, but it’s not really about you or me at this stage. It’s about Jesus and His Spirit and His power. Matthew gives no indication that Peter and Andrew offered any great potential or any particular talent that Jesus should have chosen them, but He did. “You follow Me, and I will cause you to become fishers of men and women. I don’t care who you are or are not: I promise I will make it happen if you will obey Me.”

(So Jesus seems willing to take and work with whomever He can get—prequalified, perhaps, by requirement number one: whomever is willing to “Repent,” since the Christ, and His New Kingdom, has begun upon the earth. “Repent” has no object to it; Jesus does not fill in the blank of what each of us individually, personally, needs to repent from—that is, be done with, get over, give up—in order to enter into His Kingdom. Whatever our highest allegiances had been up until now; whatever false gods we had been trusting in to keep us feeling secure, to protect us from our guilt and shame, to deliver us from the boredom of being, to bring us pleasure and fulfillment is what we each need to repent of—but we each get to fill in the blank for our own lives. And if we’re not yet ready to repent, to trust our future and our meaning into the care of the God whom Jesus reveals to us, Jesus lets us keep going as we like. George Bernard Shaw defined hell as “where you get to do exactly what you want.”)

Whatever your squeamishness about the concept of “evangelism”—never mind the fact that if you are a disciple of Jesus then He has already called you—the fact remains that Jesus has no better hope than you and me to introduce our friends to Him. And He models for us a number of ways effectively to try to do this difficult work. (Never feel badly, by the way, for the response of your friends who may be showing their amazing talent, creativity, and resolve in refusing to respond to Jesus the way you have. Our job is never to make up their mind for them; even God never presumes to do that for people. And if it makes you feel any better, Jesus Himself didn’t seem to have much luck with a lot of the people He talked to. Until the Holy Spirit was let loose, He seems to

have changed only a very few of His friends a lot—something over a dozen men, plus the handful of faithful women after three full years! So do not be discouraged.)

Jesus was a master at understanding the people He was talking to, and corresponding His speech to His audience. He talked to the religious leaders one way, and these fishermen another. (Had He found Peter and Andrew at a Medical Convention He no doubt would have promised, “I will make you healers of women and men.”) He spoke to farmers about seeds and soils; to women about lost coins and baking bread, to the ethnically pure about the despised Samaritans, to the upwardly mobile about expanding their businesses and their barns. The common people heard Jesus gladly.

Most of us don’t talk to many fishermen these days. Most of us talk to educated women and men each day. Do you know their mindset? I’ll bet you do. Many people of good will question why we Christians need to be so set upon Jesus and Jesus alone. That’s not very tolerant. Who are we to tell others we’re right and they’re wrong? Why couldn’t we unite with sincere followers of other religions and all get along in one common religion, taking the best from each? Why couldn’t we join with those of other religions and no religions in tackling together the real problems confronting humanity: hunger and war and oppression? Why do we persist in following Jesus when religion does more to provoke violence and division than unity in the world?

I hope you’d ask them, in turn, about their own religious assumptions. (Cynics and atheists do have them.) Why would one believe “religion,” and a generic religion at that, would solve the ills of the world? Why should one logically believe that every religion must *de facto* be equally valid or helpful to humanity—clearly, they are not. Why would a human-generated religion be superior to God’s own plan, and who says the true God must not have already revealed this divine, particular plan for the world? Why would one believe a world free of the Christian influence, or religions in general, would do better in overcoming the evils of the world: in fact, haven’t ideologies parading themselves under banners of “equality” and the “workers’ paradise” and “justice” and “liberty” been the most murderous of all regimes? What would their program, their center or foundation be for uniting humankind? Only after hearing such answers could you compare their assumptions with the assumptions of Jesus and the Kingdom of God.

[[Don’t be timid as a messenger for Jesus. In the end, the answer behind our approach to the world is the authority of Jesus. His authority—for whom did He speak; by what right did He cure on the Sabbath when the officials said it was illegal; who did He think He was—caused trouble back then when Temple officials and Roman governors questioned Him, and it causes trouble today. Our experience is that Jesus came with authority from the One God, and His claim to underived authority always encounters conflict with those seeking to be authorized in the normal ways on earth.

The claim of Jesus, and even His earliest disciples, was always a bold one, always a public one. When His followers claimed “Jesus is Lord” they were making a public confession—that Caesar was not. Jesus and His disciples would never have been hunted down and killed had they been willing simply to go private and keep to themselves. There were many private religions promising personal salvation which the Romans left alone—they were no threat. But Jesus claimed to speak and act with the authority of God over all the earth. From the beginning His church claimed the allegiance of all peoples (a ridiculous claim, on the face of it) and refused to name itself by any of the current names

for religions. Instead it was always the “ekklesia;” in fact the “ekklesia tou Theou/the ones called out by God.” This is the same name commonly used for the “assembly” of the citizens called by the town clerk to deal with civic affairs in the town meeting—only Jesus’ tiny ragtag church called themselves “the assembly called by God.” A lot more authoritative invitation than that issued by the town clerk, and an assembly requiring the attendance of all God’s world! Imagine such craziness. (It was only a matter of time until the Church, confessing “Jesus is Lord of all the earth” ran afoul of Caesar’s authorities—and it is still happening where the church is faithful.)

I do not expect anyone whose ultimate allegiance is somewhere else to be swayed by an appeal to the authority of Jesus. I only know I have no higher allegiance, and that the data of my own life and the data of the world makes no sense to me apart from my identity as a disciple of Jesus the Christ and as a member of His Church. (Insights drawn from Lesslie Newbigin’s *The Open Secret*.)

(And I don’t think I do Jesus any favors by backing down or keeping quiet when someone questions the basis for my beliefs. They have their own, and I am respectful—but I hope not ever wimpy or muddle-headed.)]]

I don’t suppose that Jesus ever argued anyone into the Kingdom—this is not our task—but I know He was a master at rhetoric who never let anyone get the best of Him in a debate or disagreement. I have never known anyone to repent (that is, freely give his or her life over to the New Management of the indwelling Holy Spirit) as a result of logic alone. I have found many, however, who hide behind logic, and until their logical objections to following Jesus are addressed they will make little progress in their relationship to God. Sort of like deciding whether to marry your boyfriend: your brain can serve to tell you it’s a really bad idea, but it’s probably your heart, not your brain, pressing ahead and trying to convince you that it would be a really exciting idea to say “yes”!

Jesus was never wimpy about calling people into the Kingdom of God. I hope you are not either. The secular religion all around us, for example, would have us believe that scientists are far too smart to be Christians, to trust in Jesus and see the totality of the world as He sees it. Nonsense. (The naysaying scientists and scholars seem to be the ones who get their books reviewed and published, and who make the biggest sales. But Susan Golian recently gave me a CD of a recorded PBS interview featuring Sir John Polkinghorne, formerly chair of the Department of Science at one of the colleges at Cambridge (the same chair once occupied by Sir Isaac Newton and now Steven Hawking.)

John Polkinghorne specialized in subatomic theory and quantum physics until the age of 48; he is without question one of the finest and most respected scientists in the world. He differs from the naysayers in that after his esteemed career in science he became a priest and bishop in the Anglican Church, and he maintains with great confidence that both science and the Christian faith, at their best, are dedicated above all to tracking down the truth wherever it may lead, and that they come at the same questions about reality and truth and arrive at largely the same answers from their very different perspectives. He states that both science and theology face puzzles, but that he has never yet confronted an issue as a scientist which has caused him to compromise his Christian

beliefs. Sir John Polkinghorne is a lot smarter than I am; of what evidence then should you and I be worried?

Jesus doesn't need timid ambassadors. Always respectful ones, as God is respectful of our freedom even to ignore Him—but not timid. You may be thinking, “I'm not a subatomic scientist,” “I'm not a debater,” “I'd rather my actions spoke than my words.” I hope all our actions do attract people to God; that “others may see our good works and give glory to the Father in heaven.” But it is also true that God can use you exactly as you are and where you are. Not everyone is a Sir John Polkinghorne, or a Lee Strobel or C.S. Lewis or Anne Lamott or Brennan Manning. (If you're curious, these are some of my favorite authors who have been influential in addressing seekers of truth still outside Christ's Church and pointing them to Him.)

You may not be an author or scientist, but surely you have your own gifts, your own style, your own circle of friends. You have your own way of entertaining others; your own way of deepening friendships with others, your own way of influencing others. As an evangelist, be who you are, not who you're not; offer to God whatever you've got. He'll know what to do from there.

Many of you are far from timid: you regularly invite your friends to worship. Each Women's Retreat we meet new friends whom some of you have invited. You invite your friends to our small groups. How appropriate: not every church will suit every person—but if you continue to encounter the living God in this church there's a chance your friends will too. (And we remember—the point of Evangelism is not trying to talk anyone into anything, certainly not into joining this or another particular church. I often encourage folks to explore some particular other church. No church is going to suit everyone. We serve our Lord when we invite people into deeper relationship with Him, and continue to pray for them. The result beyond that doesn't need to be our concern.)

Who have been those who have shared the good news of Jesus and His Kingdom with you? I will be forever grateful to evangelists who went out on a limb for me. None was perfect—but none was inviting me to trust in him. They pointed me to Jesus. Jim was a charismatic, enthusiastic man young man who influenced me powerfully when I was in college. Wally was a fellow account executive at my first corporate job. Wally was a larger-than-life, sometimes difficult man who invited me, still a stranger, into a men's Bible Study at 7:00 a.m. every Saturday morning in a Congregational Church in Greenwich, CT. (You know the rest of the story.) He was by no means perfect—but he was bold, and faithful to our Lord. Earl was a dear man in that church whom I had barely known. Earl was shy—but he's the one who invited and sponsored me to attend a very exciting Men's Retreat Weekend. The Holy Spirit took it from there. I am grateful for those who took seriously Jesus' call to become “fishers of men and women,” and who took risks in leading me more profoundly to Jesus.

Each of us is capable of practicing one of the disciplines in evangelism this congregation calls “choosing your six.” (Nothing magical or holy or particularly scriptural about this practice—other than at one point in the ministry of Jesus the twelve original apostles later had become seventy-two [in at least some of earliest texts]. The math would work out to each one bringing six more into relationship with Jesus, who in turn sent them out to “fish for people.” His pattern has not changed.

We are not responsible for praying for or influencing all the billions of people in the world—but that doesn't mean we can't do anything. About six people seems a reasonable number for each of us to be praying for, seeking more deeply to befriend, especially reaching out to—for their sake, and also for our Lord's. (There's no reason to tell these six, but every reason to continue to pray for them. Ask the Holy Spirit, if you haven't already, whom your six might be. And then invest yourself, behind the scenes and in person, as the Spirit leads.)

You never know what the Holy Spirit might do when you are faithful. Peter was simply telling people about Jesus that first Pentecost when we're told 3000 people decided to say "Yes." An old friend of mine, Bill Paige, tells of the Holy Spirit surprising him in a wonderful way.

Bill is an African-American evangelist who knows Jesus has given him new life; Bill is no stranger to the Spirit. In the first year after the Iron Curtain came down and the Soviet Union had just opened to the west he had been invited to preach the gospel in the Ukraine. Normally he spoke at rallies in soccer stadiums each evening for the ten days or so he was there. One delightful spring morning he and his driver/translator had stopped for breakfast in a café on the one town square in a tiny village far from any other tiny villages. Bill finished his eggs quickly and decided to walk back outside to enjoy the fresh air. Two local teenager girls noticed him and blushed and giggled as they walked past. He smiled back and kept to himself. A few minutes later they came back, this time with a passel of their friends. The more bold among them hoped to practice their English. They asked him why he was in their village. He silently prayed, and sensed the Spirit, paradoxically, urging him not to tell them. He did not understand why, but obeyed. So they bantered on about other things. (He was quite a curiosity in that rural village; they later told the translator they had never seen a Black person except on grainy black and white television reruns.) As the little town woke up, more and more people gathered in the town square. His translator finally appeared outside, but still Bill chatted about all sorts of trivial things. But he noticed dozens, a hundred villagers of all ages had now gathered around the new celebrity in town—Bill Paige from Brooklyn. And now the girl asked him again, "Why have you come to our town?"

This time the Spirit told Bill what to speak. He told that entire village he had come to their land to tell them about Jesus, who had come to set all of us human beings free from our bondage. As he told them about the Kingdom of God, about Jesus showing us the face and heart of God on earth, about His choosing to go even to the cross to show us the love of God, and His desire to abide in us and lead us still today there were tears streaming down the cheeks of the young girls and many of the others. "Thank you! We had been waiting and waiting for someone to come and tell us about Jesus! Thank you."

People all around us are waiting and waiting. Thank you.

### **Matthew 4:17-22**

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

As He walked by the Sea of Galilee, He saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea--for they were fishermen. And He said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."

Immediately they left their nets and followed Him.

As He went from there, He saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and He called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed Him.

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. So His fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to Him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and He cured them.