

THE 'E' WORD

Matthew 10:27, Matthew 28:16-20

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The story starts with my husband's father, who was one of the physicians who helped to found St. John WestShore Hospital. There is a library at the hospital in his name.

Chapter Two of the story: my youngest stepson, Bradley, procures a summer marketing internship at the hospital during college. A gregarious people person, he meets as many people as he can.

Chapter Three: that same summer, my brother-in-law, who is a physician, attends a fundraising event for the hospital. He meets the new CEO at the hospital who stares at my brother-in-law's nametag. "Brill, Brill, that name is very familiar." David says, "Well, you've probably heard of my father. You know, he helped to get the hospital started. The library is named for him." The CEO shakes his head. "No, that's not it." After a minute, he says, "Are you related to a Bradley Brill? That kid could sell ice to an Eskimo." This time, David was the one shaking his head.

Bradley graduated from Ohio University this spring and is now working in sales in Texas. Though technically still in training, he's made a few sales already and is completely in his element.

It comes naturally to some, and to other people, working in sales sounds like pure torture.

I don't think I would make a very good salesperson, unless I really believed in the product I was selling.

Have you guessed yet why I titled this sermon "the 'e' word"? From the scripture Bonnie read and what I've said so far, have you guessed what the "e" word is? The word is "evangelism." It means, "sharing the good news." But the word itself can evoke fear or even revulsion in people. When we hear it, we think of the religious people who knock on your door, who are so hard to get rid of that you learn to hide when you see them coming. Or people who try to cram their version of religion down other people's throats, full of obnoxiousness, with no acknowledgment that there are many valid ways of understanding and living the faith journey.

Evangelism makes us think of pushy sales people.

But what do we do then with scripture that calls us to tell the good news, shout it from the rooftops? What do we do with the fact that Jesus asks those who follow him to go and make disciples?

I am proposing today that it is time for us to become unapologetic evangelists, in our own way, with our own style and voice, and for our own set of reasons. In fact, I hope that by the time this sermon is over, I will have sold you on the idea that you would enjoy being an evangelist.

The stereotypical evangelist is motivated by fear, and operates out of one particular understanding of theology. He believes that people will go to hell if they don't profess Jesus Christ as their personal lord and savior. He wants to literally scare the hell out of people. So he walks around trying to "save" people.

Most of us have a different understanding of heaven and hell; we don't see God standing at the pearly gates with a clipboard deciding who to let in and not. Rather we see God's love as expansive and inclusive, full of grace and forgiveness.

If fear is not our motivation, then what is? What is it, exactly, that we're called to "sell"? What is the specific content of the good news that we're asked to share? And is it really our business to try to tell other people how to live or what to believe? What does evangelism mean for people who profess a grace-filled progressive Christianity?

Here's why I think we need to recover the word "evangelism" for our time and embrace it in a new way. We are here this morning because we have found, in the person and story of Jesus, a way of life that provides meaning and purpose and joy. We have found, in the traditions of the church, a sense of grounding in a world that often seems to be shifting under our feet. We have found, in the relationships that are formed here, a community that supports us in difficult times, people with whom we share values and learn, people who encourage us to be our best. And when it is at its best, the church is a vital piece of our social fabric, a safety net, a beacon of hope. For all of these reasons and more, we are here because we believe in the Jesus movement.

But this truth needs to be told. The Jesus movement is in trouble. In the latest study from the very reputable Pew Research Center, more than 20% of the American population describe themselves as non-affiliated with any religious practice. It is a growing number, especially among the millennial generation. If these trends continue as the researchers believe they will, the number of church-going Americans is going to

dramatically shrink in the coming decade. The decline is prominent in mainline Protestant denominations like ours. Churches are fragile institutions.

The reasons for the decline are several, and they are interesting for our particular church to consider. Young people who are disinterested in church altogether see the church as out of date and irrelevant. They see people like the Westboro Baptist Church protesters who were in Cleveland last week - the same people who protest at military funerals - with their vile, hateful signs. And young people conclude that most Christians are hateful and judgmental. They don't see the numerous Christian leaders who were circling the city with love last Sunday or people like our friend the Rev. Doug Horner from St. Paul's who was also at Public Square last week. The ones with the biggest signs make the headlines. Young people see the Creation Museum and the Noah's Ark replica just built in Kentucky and conclude that Christianity is incompatible with science. They hear of infighting in churches that seems petty and mean spirited and they want nothing to do with it.

Many people don't know that there are other kinds of churches, churches like ours that work hard to be open-minded and politically diverse, churches that put mission first, churches that cultivate healthy intergenerational relationships, welcome questions, and even have fun.

I believe it's our responsibility to do what we can to keep the Jesus movement alive, to help keep churches like ours thriving. I'm not asking you to knock on doors or stand on street corners. And I know that many of you have already embraced the call to be an evangelist. You have talked about the church, invited your friends. Most of our

new members are here, in fact, because they have been personally invited. But I want to raise this opportunity in everyone's consciousness. Be aware of opportunities to invite people in. Our social events, concerts, picnics, are all great nonthreatening ways to introduce someone to the church. I believe that the Weekend of Service that you'll begin hearing about soon would be a wonderful entree into our church. People are looking for ways to make a difference for good, ways to feel hopeful. Who do you know who might be searching for a community of support? Whose ears perk up when you talk about your own involvement in church? When is the last time you invited someone to come with you to church?

It may be slightly out of your comfort zone, but like most things, it will get easier in time. Evangelism involves thinking about what our relationship with Jesus means to us, and being able to articulate that to someone else. There is power in telling our story, speaking our own truth.

I think people need saving, but not in the same way those other evangelists use the word. I think people need saving from despair, people need saving from loneliness.

All people long for an experience of good news, a reminder that there is something that transcends this world and this life. I challenge you to embrace or renew the call to become an evangelist. Be aware of people with whom you can share the good news, tell your story, tell the story of Jesus, tell the story of our church, invite them in.