

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28
Psalm 14

1 Timothy 1:12-17
Luke 15:1-10

Evangelism! It's OK Ron, you can unlock the doors. I asked Ron to lock the doors because I was afraid that as soon as I said evangelism, you would be rushing out the doors! Last Sunday we have started a sermon series that discipleship is not just believing, it is doing. There is more to our faith than believing. As disciples we are to live out our faith. Today, I want us to think about the activity of evangelism. Evangelism frightens many of us. You have heard me say before that when you cross a Jehovah's Witness with a Presbyterian, you get someone that goes door to door but does not know what to say.

When we think of evangelism, what may come to our minds is some preacher on a street corner with a bullhorn, encouraging people to repent of their sins. Or perhaps we think of a total stranger who confronts us with the question, "Are you saved?" or "If you were to die today, where would you go?" In today's unchurched society, it could very well be that there a lot of people who have no idea what this inquirer is talking about. Years ago in one small Kansas town, the Christian Church was having some sort of revival. The preacher encouraged the audience to convert people. The next day the woman asked a man, "Are you a Christian?" to which he replied, "Heck no, I'm a Presbyterian."

Too often the focus of evangelism is that of selling people fire insurance. These people sincerely want to bring you to Christ so that you will not spend eternity in the fires of hell. It protects you from the fires of hell. There is nothing wrong with that concern about one's spiritual state. These people are sincerely concerned. But there is more to the Christian life than buying a fire insurance policy. There is more to the

Christian life than keeping ourselves out of hell. It is good to protect yourself from fire, but there is more to the Christian faith, to discipleship, than keeping people out of hell.

Reaching out to lost people was a high priority for Jesus. He declared, "For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost." We see that clearly in today's text. A shepherd has 100 sheep. One is lost. He leaves behind the 99 to go in search of the one lost sheep. This is followed by another similar parable about a woman losing a coin. Seeking the lost seems to be a central theme here in Luke.

Evangelism is not protecting people from hell. It is more than making sure St. Peter welcomes you through the pearly gates. It is encouraging others to experience God, the goodness of God, now, in this life. It is our faith that give us meaning and purpose in life; it is our faith that helps us through hard times, it is our faith that motivates us to serve other; it is our faith that grounds us. That does not mean faith will make life a joy ride, that everything is hunky-dory. It does not mean we can do-little and sit-more. Faith helps us through the twists and turns and bumps of life. There will be stress; there will be anxiety; there will be pain; there will be grief. And that is exactly why we need God. Evangelism is nothing more than sharing with others what brings meaning and purpose in our lives, sharing with others what is important in our lives.

The themes of joy and celebration are paramount in the two stories about a lost sheep and a lost coin. Each of these stories end with a celebration. The shepherd calls his friends and neighbors to celebrate his finding the one lost sheep. The woman also invites her friends and neighbors to celebrate finding the one lost coin. Each story ends with a statement that there will be joy in heaven. That is the call of evangelism, so that others may join in the celebration of God's love and grace.

Understanding evangelism as inviting others to celebrate God's goodness and grace Evangelism does not need to be confrontational. It is not going up to a total stranger and asking them if they are saved. I don't know if that has ever happened to you, but it has to me. And it is a bit intimidating. Or when someone point blank asks you, "When were you saved?" By the way, the reformed understanding of faith answers that question with, "Two thousand years ago when Christ died on the cross. Evangelism is not confrontational.

Evangelism is relational. Evangelism is not a sales pitch or pressuring people or annoying them. It is sharing with them the good life that God offers now. But all of us can find opportunities to share our faith naturally with people that we know. It can be as simple as letting folks know that our faith is important to us. That our faith grounds us, give us meaning and purpose, helps us through hard times, and motivates us to serve others. Evangelism is not confrontational, it is relational.

Evangelism is not confrontational, it is invitational. As one commentator suggests, this is a come and see method of evangelism. The most common form of invitational witness is to invite people to church for worship, or a church dinner, or to sing in the choir, or some special event in the life of the church. Studies have consistently shown that about 90 percent of people first visit a church because somebody they know invited them to come. Studies have also indicated that the vast majority of people are open to being invited. The vast majority are not insulted or offended if we invite them to some event, a Bible study or other study group, the choir, to worship, especially if it is a special event like Christmas or Easter.

If we understand evangelism as more than fire insurance, as an invitation to participate in the good life God gives us now, then we need to be careful about not being hypocritical about our evangelism. What I mean by that, is that evangelism needs to be done hand in hand with mission. Back in 1911 Joe Hill wrote the song, *The Preacher and the Slave*. That song was a parody of the hymn *In the Sweet By-and-By*. In this song Hill was criticizing churches for saving people but not for helping them in this life. The first verse has these lyrics: Long-haired preachers come out every night; “Try to tell you what’s wrong and what’s right; But when asked how ‘bout something to eat; They will answer in voices so sweet.” The chorus goes, “You will eat, bye and bye; In that glorious land above the sky; Work and pray, live on hay; You’ll get pie in the sky when you die.” Some may feel his criticism is too sharp, but there was, and continues to be, an element of truth in that. Because evangelism is more than saving people from hell, because evangelism is inviting people to experience the good life now, then that means that we need to put our money where our mouth is, and feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned, give shelter to the homeless, water to the thirsty. Why should people be interested in God if the church communicates in its actions, or lack of actions, that God does not care about their life now. Evangelism is not confrontational. It is caring.

When my twin brother and I went to Kentucky two weeks ago, he wanted to tour the Chevrolet Corvette assembly plant and the Corvette museum in Bowling Green, Kentucky. In the museum there is a display room where are parked brand new Corvettes that the owners would be taking delivery on that day. There was a small sign in front of each car displaying the names of the new owners. I was standing in front one

car looking at it, when this exuberant blond woman came up to me, and said, "I'm Mary." To which I wanted to say, "So what!" Before I knew it she was hugging me. While I was trying to figure it out who she was and why she was hugging me, she points at this new car, and says, "That's mine." And I look at the placard, and, sure enough, it said, "Mary." She was so excited about getting a Corvette, she wanted to invite others in her celebration. Evangelism is inviting others to celebrate God's goodness and grace.

Blessed be the Lord our God. Amen.