**Evangelism for a New Era**

**Text: Isaiah 55:1-2**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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First Christian Church in Boulder, Colorado had a problem. Kind of a nice problem, actually. You see, they were growing. And they’d built a beautiful new building. So far, so good…but, they’d over-built. They had so much space that they didn’t know what to do with it. So they decided to launch an evangelism campaign. They did a mass mailing to the community advertising that on a certain Sunday they would be receiving new members. When that Sunday arrived, the place was packed! The pastor preached a rip-roaring come-to-Jesus sermon, and when he issued the Invitation to Discipleship, a mass of people moved forward. Something like 200 people joined the church that day!

Now that was a different time and a different community, but one thing is the same: people are hungry for the Word. Folks hunger and thirst for the Word of God. They want to hear the good news that they are loved. They want a sense of purpose in their lives. They want to be part of a caring community that is making a difference in the world. They want their souls to be fed through the blessings of prayer.

People are hungry for the Word. They want to hear the good news of God’s love revealed in Jesus Christ. They long for a world which reflects something of the compassion and the justice of God’s Kingdom. Which is why evangelism is as important today as ever.

Evangelism: from the Greek word *evaggelion,* which means *good news*. Evangelism is nothing more – and nothing less – than sharing with others the good news of God’s love in Jesus Christ. And evangelism been around for a long time; like ever since Andrew spent a day with Jesus, and then went to get his brother Simon and said, “Hey, come with me and check out this Jesus dude; I think he might be the Messiah ” (John 1:35-42).

I wonder if something like this has ever happened to you:

You’ve just read a good book, and then you learn that the author is in town on a speaking engagement, so you say to a friend, “Hey, let’s go and hear this guy. I just read his book and he’s amazing!”

Or you’ve just been introduced to someone, and you have an incredible conversation, and then you send an email to a friend and you say, “I’ve just been introduced to a new friend and you’ve *got* to meet her!”

My guess is that something like that has happened to you at some point in your life. We tell others about a good book or a new friend. Why not tell others about a good church? Why not tell others about Jesus?

There certainly are plenty of folks to talk to:

* 23% of the U.S. adult population say that they have no religious affiliation. This is the group that is sometimes referred to as the “nones.”
* 35% of Millennials identify themselves as “nones.”
* 17% of Baby Boomers identify as “nones.”
* And 18% of all Americans – nearly 1 in 5 – say that they were raised as a Christian or some other religion, but now they have no religious affiliation.

You know these people. You might have heard some of them say, “I’m spiritual, but not religious.” For a lot of them, that’s because they’ve been turned off – or, worse yet, they’ve been hurt or abused – by religious folks who *claim* to be Christians, but whose brand of Christianity contains little, if any, good news.

Well, let me tell you: any church that is preaching something less than good news isn’t preaching the Gospel. Any church where people’s spirits are being beaten down isn’t living out the Gospel. Any church whose long suit is fear isn’t serving the Gospel. Because the Gospel is, by definition, good news. That’s what the word means. It comes from the old English word Godspell which means, “good news.” Just like the Greek word for evangelism. The Gospel is the good news of a God who loves us unconditionally. The Gospel is the good news of a Creator who loves the whole world infinitely. So great is the love of this God who made the heavens and the earth that he came to earth in human form to share this love with all, and for all. This is John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” Martin Luther called this “the Gospel in miniature.” We worship a God who befriends the lonely and feeds the hungry; a God who gives courage to those who fear and hope to those who despair; a God who feeds body and soul with abundance. Any church, any religion, any person, any thing that promises salvation yet delivers anything less than such a loving, caring, gentle, forgiving god is not offering to the world the Creator God who has come to us in Jesus Christ.

As I said, this is the God who feeds body and soul with abundance. The prophet whom biblical scholars call 2nd Isaiah introduces us to this God in today’s scripture lesson:

“Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters: and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.”

The prophet is speaking metaphorically, of course. He is addressing a people who are *spiritually* hungry. Indeed, they’re spiritually *starved*. They have been worshipping any number of things that are less than God: religious idols, or military might, or money, or those in positions of power and authority; things that *promise* great satisfaction, but never really satisfy; always leaving the disappointed worshipper craving for more.

In 2nd Isaiah’s day and in ours, there are always those who devote their lives to such false gods. Today these gods might be drugs or alcohol or wealth or power or popularity. And then there are other folks whose lives are relatively healthy, but they have this nagging sense that there must be something more to life. Perhaps there’s some higher purpose to which they might be devoting their time and energy. All of these folks come to the end of each day, and they sit down at a spiritual table that is devoid of food.

Folks like Connie. She grew-up Roman Catholic, but by her teenage years her faith tradition had lost all meaning for her. She became what we would call today a “none.” Until a friend invited her to a Disciples church. And there she found a warm, welcoming community that she had never experienced before. And she found an approach to Christianity that spoke to both her heart and her mind. And she found people who accepted her, just the way she was.

I share this story not to be critical of the Roman Catholic Church or of any other particular religious tradition, but to underscore the fact that there are folks who’ve been raised in any number of traditions who now view religion as something bad; folks who’ve been at best so bored and at worst so damaged by religion that they think they never want to set foot in a church or a synagogue or a mosque ever again. Meanwhile, they are spiritually starving to death.

These are among the folks who are hungry for the Word. These are the folks who need someone to tell them where they can find spiritual food.

That someone is you. And that place where they can be fed is right here. And I don’t mean just literally fed with the good food that we’ll serve after the service today and every first Sunday of the month, although that’s a start. *Spirits* are fed in *this* place, *each* Sunday, and at other times during the week. And you are just the person to tell a hungry soul where to find food; good food, spiritual food.

There are all sorts of ways to do this. I’ll name just a few:

The easiest way to be an evangelist is to simply invite someone to come to church with you. It could be a friend, a neighbor, a co-worker, a family member; anyone whom you know. Tell them that you’ll pick them up at a certain time. Make sure you get here early enough to offer them a cup of coffee and some goodies at the Hospitality Table. Introduce them to other folks. Sit with them during the service. And make sure you invite them again. I once served a church where a few members started to invite their friends and neighbors to worship, and the attendance quadrupled over 2 years. Be an evangelist: invite someone to come to church with you.

Or, you can make a point of welcoming someone on a Sunday morning whom you don’t know. Maybe they’ve been here before or maybe they haven’t. Doesn’t matter. Either way you can walk up to someone you don’t know and say, “Hi, I’m Bruce Ervin, or George Sorrells, or Jackie Robbins, or…I’m (fill in the blank), it’s good to see you this morning.” Chat with them a bit, and then introduce them to someone else. Invite them to sit with you in the Sanctuary. If they’re having trouble following the order of service, give them a hand. Be an evangelist: greet someone you don’t know.

Or, you can volunteer to make a brief visit to someone who’s visited us on a Sunday. The data shows that a first time Sunday morning visitor is more likely to eventually join the church if someone stops by their house on a Sunday afternoon with a loaf of bread and literature about the church and invites them to come back. A 2 minute conversation at the door. That’s all it takes. Be an evangelist: bring a loaf of bread and a friendly smile to a Sunday visitor.

Or, finally, when you engage in some act of caring or honesty that for you seems routine but which astounds someone else, explain yourself. You know, you’re at the store and you get charged way less than something is supposed to cost and you say to the cashier, “Um, I think there might be a mistake here,” and she thanks you for catching her error and then she says, “You know, most people would’ve just walked away. Why did you say something?” There’s your chance to say, “Well, I’m a Christian, and the Bible teaches me to be honest.” There is no doubt in my mind that all of you engage in such acts of kindness and honesty on a regular basis. But no one will know that you’ve done is an act of faith unless you tell them. Be an evangelist: explain yourself.

There are any number of other ways that we can be evangelists. And we can talk about those in the months ahead. Of course, some people believe that they don’t have to talk about Jesus because they show the love of Jesus in the way in which they live. Well, that’s true; you can be an evangelist in deed as well as in word. In fact, I hope that we’re *all* evangelists in that way. But good deeds don’t often speak for themselves. Lots of folks do good deeds. Only some are aware that the impetus for such good deeds comes from a God who is merciful and gracious; a God who embraces the world in love.

People are hungry for the Word. Folks are longing to be fed. And we…we know where there’s good food. It’s right here (congregation), and right here (Bible), and right here (heart). Tell it!