

April 10, 2016



## "Christian Basics: Evangelism"

Sermon by Rev. Robert English

John 21:1-14

*After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off. When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.*

This morning's text from John's gospel is a fascinating story of the resurrected Jesus appearing to his disciples. See following the experience of the empty tomb and the alleluias and the he is risens, the disciples initially return to their homes in Galilee and to their comfortable lives. They go back to work, fishing because you might recall they were in fact fishermen before they started this crazy adventure following Jesus. They come back to what they know, what's familiar. I imagine though, for the disciples, it must have felt a little bit like coming home after going away for college, or maybe like Frodo and the Hobbits returning to the Shire at the end of Return of the King, you come back and everything else is the same, but you aren't the same, you've changed.

Nevertheless the disciples go back to doing what the disciples do, they go out on the lake and start fishing, but, somehow after being with Jesus, they have lost their knack for fishing. They can't catch anything, they are coming up empty handed, when a man appears on the shore and tells them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat; which they do, and haul in more fish than they know what to do with. They realize this helpful stranger is in fact Jesus, they come ashore and share a wonderful Israeli breakfast of bread and fish.

Now fishing in the gospels is one of the overarching metaphors which pops up here and there. It is a metaphor for the mission of the church and the mission of the disciples, to be bearer of the good news of Jesus, the gospel, to go forth and fish for people, or in other words to be evangelicals.

This is the second week of our sermon series Christian Basics and this morning we are talking about evangelism. Everyone's favorite right?

Let's face it, when we hear the word evangelism or evangelical, more often than not, we conjure up an image of a certain type of Christian in our minds. It's hard not to, especially in the midst of an election season when you turn on the news and hear about the evangelical vote. And because this term brings to mind all sorts of different things and carries with it a certain amount of baggage we sometimes shy away from evangelism or being evangelical because, well, it's just easier and more comfortable for us. But, perhaps we can dive in, deconstruct and wade through all of the modern connotations to see what it meant for the earliest church and how that might apply to us today as we follow in the way of Jesus.

The word evangelism comes from the Greek word *evangelium* which means a proclamation of Good News. In order to put this word and its meaning into context, we always need to remember the background of Jesus' life, death and resurrection was the Roman Empire, the biggest, baddest, most awesome empire the world had ever know. The Roman Empire was ruled by a dictator named Caesar, and Caesar was the most politically powerful person on the planet. Caesar was not only a political figure but also a religious figure who demanded ritual sacrifice and spiritual allegiance as well as political subjugation. The Roman Empire had this mission to conquer the entire world bringing the Pax Roman - Peace of the Empire - to every people, every tribe and every nation. They would march into your town, your village with all of the military might of the most powerful Empire the world has ever known. They would conquer your village through fear and coercive violence. They would demand that you declare your allegiance to Caesar by saying Caesar is Lord, and then they would make an evangelium - a proclamation of Good News: you can now receive the Pax Roman, the peace of the Empire. You were now a citizen of Rome.

So, over in Galilee there's a movement of people following this prophetic, pastoral Rabbi, who preaches about this thing called the kingdom of God where the poor, the weak, and the marginalized are welcomed as guests of honor to the table, a kingdom where the real way to peace, God's peace, is through praying for your enemies, forgiving those who hurt you.

This was a movement that claimed there was a different power at work in the world, not the power of fear, violence, and oppression but the power of humble sacrificial life-giving love for all people, even for widows and children, tax collectors, and sinners. This Rabbi invited people into a different way of being human, a different way of being a community, a

different vision of the world. His name was Jesus and because of this vision and this message he was arrested, condemned and crucified. But on the third day he was resurrected.

Now the early church they insisted that the resurrection of Jesus was God's vindication that the way of Jesus was the way of abundant life. They insisted that the resurrection of Jesus is God's confirmation that the way of humble life-giving love is better than the way of coercive violence, fear, and oppression, that the way of Jesus is better than the way of Caesar and that Jesus, not Caesar, is Lord, and that is evangelium, a proclamation of Good News.

So the early Christians were walking around proclaiming this good news to all the folks who were oppressed and beaten down by the structures and powers of the world. The Christians were walking around proclaiming that no matter who you are or how powerless you feel, no matter what you're going through, or where you've been, even death itself doesn't have the last word.

The Christians were proclaiming that if we live into the fullness of this story of Jesus' life death and resurrection that a different kind of world is possible, a better world not ruled by the power of the sword but ruled by the power of love.

They proclaimed this Good News to be for everyone, not just for some. Which is why Jesus was always so insistent that those people who were seen by society as non-persons, children, women, slaves, strangers, immigrants, tax collectors, receive the place of honor at the table, why they are inheritors of the kingdom of God, because the Good News has to be for everyone or it's just not Good News.

So where do we fit into this here and now?

We live in some pretty crazy and interesting times. There is a lot of skepticism about organized religion and the church in particular. And if we are being honest with ourselves we deserve some of it, maybe even most of it. Polls have shown that millennials see the church as a place of judgment, a rigid institution, and that it is irrelevant to their day to day life. And yet, most of this generation identify as spiritual but not religious.

Within the church there is a lot anxiety about our future, whether or not we can turn the ship, so to speak, and get people to come back and occupy our pews.

But, I think, we have a different opportunity in the midst of these times and these days. I think we have so much to offer our neighborhood and our city. I think that we have Good News to share and proclaim and I think that there are folks in our neighborhoods and our lives who desperately want to hear Good News.

As we think about what it means for us to share good news, to be evangelists, I'd like to propose thinking about it on two levels, as a church community and as individuals disciples.

The story we heard this morning shows us that sometimes we have to shift our perspective, our orientation, and our direction in order to see some new results. We are in a time and a place where we have an amazing opportunity to cast our nets on the other side, to shift our mindset in order to share the good news of God's love for all people. And ultimately, at the heart of this shift, is taking on a new agenda when it comes to our community's evangelism, it's something that I like to call-grace based evangelism. Or to put it another way, to love our neighbors without any other agenda other than loving our neighbors. Let's take a moment to unpack this. For a long time the larger church in the United States has functioned with an attractional model, meaning that one of the underlying reasons for organizing events, doing ministry or outreach was to attract people to the church and eventually make them one of us. We see this manifested in many different ways including, but not limited to, this phrase we sometimes hear repeated: "it was so great that all these new people come to this wonderful life-giving event, now how do we get them to come to church on Sunday morning?" See the underlying condition: if we do this X, Y or Z, then we can get people to occupy our pews. But our God is not a God of conditions, our God is a God whose love and grace is unconditional and whose call is invitational.

As we live into this new world we need to rethink this model of attraction and shift to focusing more on ways our church community can be an offering of grace and love for our neighbors, without any other agenda other than loving our neighbors and proclaiming the good news of God's grace and peace for all people. This shift does not mean that we change what we do necessarily, we're still fishing, but we're doing it differently. We switched to the other side of the boat to cast our nets on the other side.

So as a church we intentionally focus our outreach ministry on building loving relationships with our neighbors and showing Christian hospitality. We continue do things like host Easter Egg hunts to offer a safe place for families to be in an intergenerational community and share in the joy of children's laughter. We build a community library for our neighborhood because we think that our neighborhood is enriched when we share stories and knowledge with one another. We open up our facility for prayer, walking the labyrinth, or yoga to be an open and constant place for spiritual solace and formation. We create simple opportunities for worship beyond Sunday morning at 10 a.m. because we recognize that work or soccer or brunch with non-church going folks sometimes becomes a priority. We provide a simple pot luck meal and some crafts for the homeless families in transitional housing to share our lives with one another and to give working parents a break from cooking one meal a month. We offer ourselves freely, as a gift of grace, loving our neighbors without any strings attached or any other agendas, because we believe the Good News of God's unbelievable grace for everyone.

Now as disciples, I want to challenge each of us to be willing to share what we find here with people in our lives, our friends and our families; to share from a place of personal genuine faith why you come here for worship, for prayer, for community to find God.

To paraphrase Tony Campolo, an amazing Christian thinker, writer and evangelist, “no one ever came to faith because they lost an argument; they came to faith because of a relationship.” Take a moment and think about your own life of faith. What comes to mind, a place, a book, or is it a people, a person? The story of our tradition, from the get go is a story of God’s grace entering into every type of human relationship and blessing it with God’s life-giving love. We are relational beings drawn into community. Each of us has the opportunity to share our own good news, the good news of God’s love for all people with another person, to share how and why this church community challenges you to be part of making a better world, how this community of faith has embodied the life-giving love of God for you and your family. Think about it, pray about it, someone in your life who might need good news. Offer your story to them without any agenda other than love, and let God do the rest.

Thanks be to God, Amen.