



The Episcopal Church of
St. John the Baptist

Evangelism requires words as well as actions

Sermon for Sunday, May 17, 2020 (Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year A)

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“Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence.”

1 Peter 3:15-16

That line from our reading from 1 Peter today is one of my favorite scriptures on the topic of evangelism.

In the Episcopal Church, people tend to get uncomfortable when you start talking about evangelism. They think evangelism means condemning other people, telling them they're wrong and are going to go to hell.

Many of us who are not cradle Episcopalians chose this church because we liked the fact that most people in this church don't use the Bible as a weapon and shove their faith down other people's throats, so whenever the topic of evangelism comes up, we get a little squirmy. Maybe we thought we left that behind with those “other” churches.

But evangelism doesn't have to be synonymous with those negative images. Evangelism simply means “sharing the good news” – the good news that Jesus is risen from the dead, that death no longer has the last word, that God loves us unconditionally. **Why *wouldn't* you want to share that information with everyone you know?**

Evangelism is about bringing a *positive* message, a liberating message, a message of love and reconciliation.

Evangelism is about sharing with others the reason for the *hope that is in us*, as 1 Peter says.

Many of us are more comfortable sharing our faith through our actions rather than through words. We don't want to push our faith on anyone else, so we figure we'll just share our faith by example through the good deeds we do in the world.



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I've heard many people within the Episcopal Church – myself included! – reference St. Francis of Assisi's famous statement on evangelism to describe their approach: "Preach the Gospel at all times; if necessary, use words."

While there is deep wisdom in that statement about allowing our lives to be our witness, sometimes we use that statement as an excuse *never* to use words.

Instead of

"Preach the Gospel at all times; if necessary, use words,"

we're essentially saying,

"Preach the Gospel at all times; it's not necessary to use words."

But that's not what Francis was saying. He wasn't saying "your actions are the Gospel," he was saying "your actions should proclaim the Gospel" – and the Gospel is not "feed the hungry and work for justice," however important those things are. The Gospel is, "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again."

Episcopalians have a tendency to focus on works of mercy and advocacy for justice as the heart of what our faith is about, but those things are not unique to the Episcopal Church or to Christianity. All the world's religions teach the importance of these things, and they are also central to the ethical imperatives of many people with no religious faith at all. You all know those things are extremely important to me, and I believe they are essential to what it means to be Christian – but by themselves, they are not the definition of what it means to be Christian.

What it means to be Christian is to put our faith in Jesus, and to commit to follow him as our Lord.

If we're "preaching the Gospel at all times" by feeding the hungry and working for justice and never saying anything about *why* we're doing those things, the Gospel we're preaching is a universal message that applies to all people and all religions. Without using words, we're not actually preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

I know that may be hard to hear for some of you, but it's the truth. Our actions by themselves cannot express the specific words of our faith.



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In our baptismal covenant, we promise to “proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ” (BCP 305). Notice that it says “by *word* and example” – not just “by example.”

And the “Good News of God in Christ” we have vowed to proclaim is not “God wants us to love one another and work for justice.” That’s certainly the good news of God, and many religions join us in proclaiming that message. But the Good News of God in Christ is that God has become human, has lived among us as one of us, and has freed us from the tyranny of death and sin. The Good News of God in Christ is that we don’t have to worry about “earning” our salvation, that God forgives us and accepts us just as we are, unconditionally.

Our actions cannot express those things by themselves. We must open our mouths and say, “Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again,” and explain how that changes everything. How we no longer have to be held captive by a mindset that keeps track of every wrong, how we can be free to love without fear because we know we are completely and totally loved.

We are particularly reminded of this call to use words to share the content of our faith during Easter season, when we read in the book of Acts how the church spread throughout the Mediterranean world in the first century as a result of people speaking to others about their faith, sharing the news of Jesus’s resurrection.

In today’s reading from Acts, we heard Paul’s famous speech to the Athenians, persuading them of the truth of the Christian message and inviting them to put their faith in Jesus. This speech has long been considered a model evangelism speech, because Paul meets the people where they are, acknowledging the truth in their own tradition, quoting some of their own poets, and working to rationally persuade them of the truth of his faith. While Paul certainly had his share of arrogance and triumphalism, tending to think his way was the only right way – whether he was persecuting the church or advocating for it – in this passage we see Paul at least willing to concede that others might have had *some* glimpse of the truth before Paul came on the scene, and presenting his argument in a way that is framed as good news – “I come to bring you more full knowledge of something that you yourselves have said you do not fully know.”

But even though Paul’s speech has been held up as a model for evangelism, I still prefer the approach in 1 Peter: “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone



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who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence” (1 Peter 3:15-16), because the assumption behind this statement is that we should share our faith **when we are asked about it**, not when we decide we want to tell others about it, and that we should be living in such a way that **others will ask us about our faith.**

In this scenario, the impetus behind us sharing our faith comes not from our desire to “fix” others, but from others’ curiosity at how we can live our lives with such hope.

The way I read this statement from 1 Peter, we have to be truly “walking the walk” in order to earn the privilege of speaking about our faith. If we want to speak about our faith to others, our lives have to be saying something loudly enough that someone asks for us to translate.

But it also requires that we have done the intentional work of thinking about *why* we have faith, *why* we have hope – so that when someone asks us, we have an answer ready. Just because our usual modus operandi is to share our faith through our actions rather than through our words doesn’t mean that we therefore have no words to explain why we do what we do. When someone asks us about our faith, we should be ready to explain it to them. And we should be living in such a way that compels them to ask.

What is the hope that is in you? What would you say if someone asked you how you can believe in God, why Jesus is so important to you, how you can live with faith and hope in the midst of these times? Are you ready to give an account for the hope that is in you?

If you feel like you’re not sure what you’d say, or worry that you aren’t the most eloquent speaker in the world, remember that many of our biblical leaders felt the same way. The night before his death, Jesus reassured us that the Holy Spirit will be with us, to lead us into all truth and to give us the words to say. So when someone asks, take a deep breath, ask for guidance from the Spirit, and use words to proclaim your faith.