

Sermon 4: The E Word: Evangelism and our Common Heritage

**(James 5:13:20, Mark 9:38-50)
Sunday September 20, 2015**

September 15 to October 15 is our Hispanic/Multicultural Heritage month, and today in particular we will have a special potluck as a way of celebrating together. Today also is Evangelism Sunday according to our national Presbyterian Calendar and I am trying to merge the two events together and focus on one thing that can be a sort of common element.

At age 28 I came to the USA first to study English as a foreign language in a college in Chicago, Illinois. I had just finished five years of pastoral work at a church in Alexandria, Egypt and though I had English classes for 16 years prior to coming to the States, the majority of my English was academic; reading and writing with very limited opportunity for simple daily conversation and many of the American “foul” languages were completely strange to me.

At Concordia college in Chicago, and particularly at the dorm I started to hear for the first time the “S” word, the “H” word, and the “F” word. But never in a million years did I think I would ever hear that Evangelism is referred to as the “E” word in our mainline churches. The E word has replaced sex and money as “That which Must Not Be

Named.” When I first started my ministry as a national staff member in the “Evangelism and Church Development” department, any time I would say the phrase “Church Growth” I would feel as if I had said something wrong!

In her study of “the Mainline Evangelism Project” Martha Grace Reese interviewed 1000 elders and ministers of mainline congregations here in America. Let me share some of her findings:

Reese found out that while most pastors love being in ministry, their biggest discouragement is that they feel ineffective in sharing the Gospel. A record study of 25,000 members survey of the Christians (Disciples of Christ) denomination had 53 questions. People had to rank statements about their churches according to how strongly they agreed with them: Here are the two statements that ranked dead last: “This church is effectively reaching un-churched people” and second to it was “This congregation provides training in sharing Christ with others”

When asked “what do you think when we hear the word “Evangelism”, here are some of the answers:

1. No, I don't want to knock on stranger's doors and give them some pamphlets.
2. A Televangelist asking for money.
3. My college roommate kept hammering about salvation and trying to talk me to giving my life to Christ.

4. I know we are suppose to talk with people about faith and invite them to church but I don't want to lose friends. I feel guilty.
5. I don't think we should do evangelism. It implies other religions are wrong.

However, the churches that grew (150 of the most growing mainline congregations) were surveyed and the findings indicated that churches that grew were those whose members learned how to talk about their faith and share their faith. This is really what the word Evangelism means, it is the sharing of the good news. Three main aspects made a big different in these congregations: one, their members have a healthy relationship with God; second, they believe that the Holy Spirit is the one that gives faith and transforms people, but they learned to cooperate with the Spirit; and the third finding was that people who learned to share their faith said that evangelism changed lives, theirs included. Evangelism, then, emerges from a trinity of relationship: with God, with the congregation and with people who are outside the congregation.

When these growing churches asked why they do evangelism the answer was:

1. A relationship with Christ makes life make more sense.
2. I love God so much, said another, I want people to know this joy.
3. Being in a church community gives me a way to serve others and keep growing.

4. I used to feel so guilty about things I had done. Christ has forgiven me, and my church friends love me, I want to help others now.
5. God healed me with a miracle. I want others people to know it is possible.
6. Being with Christ has changed my life from addictions to learning acceptance and grace.

So, again, the heart of Evangelism emerges from the interaction of these three sets of relationships, personal relationship with God, healthy congregational relationship, and caring about people outside our circle, outside the church.

In other words, faith sharing focuses on relationship more than anything else. Evangelism is motivated by growing love for the other. It is not about talking people onto faith, it is not about scaring people with horror stories about Hell and fire. “Evangelism is people sharing with others their personal understanding that life is better, richer, truer if one has faith in Christ and lives in a faith community.”

This is exactly what we understand from James’s and Mark’s passages for today. We are reminded in Mark of the purpose of the salt, that is being dissolved to keep food and other things from being spoiled and to season or give taste to what we eat. Can anyone enjoy unsalted food, that is what is expected from us, to share our faith so that people’s life be tasteful, be meaningful.

And James, as he always does, explore the practical ways of sharing faith through prayer and pastoral care. In verses 13 to 19 we read: “Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

“My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.”

Rees concludes, “mainline church pastors have great experiences, strong solid theology and great leadership training but most of us don’t connect our great theology and Biblical interpretation with real experience of God.” We are too rational, too sophisticated and over educated and we lack real life encounters and cross cultural experiences. We thus failed to reach the masses in our society and thus miss big time on growth.

The theology of most mainline pastors preached is grace filled, what make it then real and rich is to live it vividly and share it daily.

One of the stories Reese mentioned in her book, is that of a Baptist minister who used to be a member of the Southern Baptist Convention. At one point in his life he got divorced from his wife. His wife was the one that divorced him. Accordingly he was kicked out of his congregation, and he was dismissed from his denomination. He was in very bad shape, about to loose his faith if it were not for some of his friends that hosted him in their house, provided room and board for him and took him out for some meals. They were very good gracious and loving family, but never asked him to got to church with them. This family was a Presbyterian family. Later on, this minster became a Presbyterian preacher and his church became one of these 150 most growing congregations in the denomination. He made the comment about how mainline congregations have grace and love to people, but unfortunately they either don't or done know how to share this good news of love and grace.