

Good News for a New Age

Matthew 16:13-26

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time/30th September 2007

My Presbyterian Church planning calendar tells me that today is Evangelism Sunday. It's not a high point in the year for Presbyterians, I must say, and not really a holiday in the liturgical sense. But it is put there to remind us that evangelism is something we are called to do as a church.

Presbyterians get squeamish around the word. If you want to see a Presbyterian fast break out into a cold sweat, just ask him to talk to a stranger about his faith or offer a theological defense of not only *what* he believes, but *why*. We get nervous around the "E" word, maybe because in our age there's considerable cultural baggage associated with this word. We might think of Bible-thumping evangelists trying to force religion upon someone. None of us want to do this; Presbyterians are too polite for that. Or it might sound too much like "Evangelical"; for some that might be an awkward label to bear.

As I've said before, I personally have no problem with the word "evangelical." It's a word, I think, the church needs to reclaim for itself (instead of allowing it to be used by the culture in such a disparaging way). In some languages, like German, the word evangelical is synonymous with being Reformed. Evangelical means someone who has good news to share; it has nothing to do with being a theological conservative. It is the person who offers the "evangel," the good news. When the Roman army was triumphant in battle the generals would send an "evangel" into town or back to Rome, a soldier who went running, sharing the good news of victory. The church baptized that image. That's what it's like to follow Jesus. We are sent to tell our neighbors, the world, the good news of God's reign and triumph over sin and death. An evangelical is someone who has good news to share, that a new age has dawned in the resurrection of Jesus. Something new has come into existence, and we are different people because of it. That something, this new life, is worth sharing, of shouting from the rooftops. *The church is evangelical when it shares God's good news, which was the good news of God's kingdom which Jesus' preached and called his disciples to join.*

But how do we share this good news? This is one of the greatest challenges facing the church today. It's always difficult. However, there's a different question we have to ask first, the question Jesus posed to Peter, "Who do people say that I am?"

Jesus took his disciples to the region of Caesarea Philippi, just north of the Sea of Galilee, into a predominantly Gentile area. The city of Caesarea Philippi was a kind of religious Disneyland of the ancient world, full of temples to many deities. You could go to the temples of your favorite god, worship, make a few offerings, maybe have a picnic – who knows, maybe make a day of it. One of the major attractions at the site was (and is) the cave of Pan, the cave that leads to the birthplace of Pan, the chief god of the underworld. The cave was considered the gateway to Hades. On the way to Caesarea Philippi, Jesus and his disciples would have passed a massive temple to the divinity of Caesar Augustus, the Augusteum. Scholars originally thought the Augusteum was *in* Caesarea, until it was discovered several years ago (in 1999) five miles to the south. We know now it was *on the way there*. Perhaps it was near this massive, marble temple glistening in the sun that according to Mark's gospel "on the way to Caesarea Phillipi (Mark 8:27)" Jesus asked Peter, "Who do people say that I am?" "Who do you say that I am?" Who is from God? Jesus or Caesar?

Then and now, Jesus asks us to make confession before the temples of competing deities, who all try to lay claim over our lives, including Caesar. We make these confessions even before the gates of Hades. We are asked by Jesus, "Who do people say that I am?" The first question inquires, what does everyone else think? But then Jesus hones in and says, but what do *you* think? In other words, "*Who am I to you?*" This is perhaps one of the most important questions of our lives, which takes a lifetime to answer. "Who am I to you?" Jesus asks. When we strive to answer this question in our lives and in our life together as a church we are being evangelical. The way we embody our response to these questions tells the world what we consider good news. When we are silent, we are also making our confession just as much as when vocal. How we respond to this question is the degree to which we share the good news. Who am I to you?

It would seem, then, that all the church has to do is answer this question, share the good news, and the church would grow. But we all know it's not that simple. The truth is, we are living in an age where many in the culture really don't care who Jesus is, don't feel any need to answer Jesus' question. Or, if they like Jesus, admire, respect, maybe even worship him, they really don't care what his church has to say, because there's much about the church in our age that seems to have little to do with message and love of Jesus. I would agree with them. So, I understand when people are skeptical about the church or about Christians. For a long time and in many places, the American church was little more than a social club or country club, a fellowship club of likeminded people that excluded all kinds of people who didn't meet the membership requirements. When people went to such churches searching for Jesus, looking for healing, looking for forgiveness and acceptance, looking for joy, looking for a

community of God, they found something else that was very far from the kingdom of God – and they didn't find Jesus.

The church of Jesus Christ is now living through a time of considerable cultural upheaval and moving into a new age, perhaps the greatest since the Reformation. In order for the church – for Catonsville Presbyterian Church – to be faithful in these changing times, it is imperative for us to understand the massive tectonic shifts occurring all around us. “The world is changed.”¹ Many are watching the Ken Burns' PBS series, “The War.” The last fifty years of American society was shaped by that experience, including the church. However, the church of that post-war era is slowly moving away. In that world the church was reinforced by society and society reinforced the church. Watching it last night, I was shocked to hear a radio broadcast of President Roosevelt *praying* for the nation and for the soldiers approaching the shores of Normandy. Americans went to church houses of worship on D-Day, it was the patriotic thing to do. That day is over. The role of church and state are slowly changing, moving away. We are in a new day and we need to understand it.

Some have argued this is the most exciting time to be part of the church since 313, which was the year when Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. Then everyone had to become Christian and the case could be made that was the beginning of the end of the Jesus movement. Now we live in a widely secular age. The mainline church isn't mainstream; it's sideline, side stream, side street. You don't have to be Christian. And you're not a Christian simply by being an American; they're not synonymous – never were. While this might produce anxiety in some (yielding fundamentalisms of all kinds), for others this is a golden opportunity because the church is now free to be the church. We're not supported by the culture (look at the number of stores open on Sunday or the various sports activities we're competing with), but neither are we looking to the culture to approve what we do. We're free to do our own thing. Just like in Caesarea Philippi, we are asked to make our confession of Christ in a widely pagan, secular world full of competing, conflicting deities all vying for power and time and money over our lives. We are asked to decide what is really most important to us and how we will spend our time, energy, and resources accordingly. To make our confession in such an age can energize the church – and it will also inevitably change the *outlook* and *feel* of the church.

¹ From J. R. R. Tolkien (1892-1973), *The Fellowship of the Ring*, where Galadriel broods, “The world is changed. I feel it in the water. I feel it in the earth. I smell it in the air. Much that once was, is lost, for none now live who remember it.”

Our confession has to include what Peter found most disturbing in Jesus' words: *the cross*. Peter pulls Jesus off to the side and rebukes his idea of suffering love. Jesus says, "Get behind me, Satan. You are a stumbling-block; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Calling Peter, whose name means, "rock," a stumbling block, is like Jesus saying to him, "Peter, what do you have, rocks for brains?" This is what sets us apart – our confession, our good news that includes a suffering Messiah.

The shape of our church's mission must be cruciform. The way of the cross shapes our life together. New Testament scholar, James Brownson, makes this central point: "Any group that worships a crucified person will have difficulty functioning as the Chamber of Commerce." [Nothing against the Chamber of Commerce, it's just we're called to be different.] He continues, "Any community of people that celebrates the fact that God redeems the world through a crucified Messiah will also be a community that celebrates how God continues to work in unexpected, unconventional, and unpredictable ways. The message of the cross invites us to look to a God who works from the bottom up and from the margins inward, rather than from the top down. Christianity has not often functioned with spiritual vitality in the mainstream of a culture. There's something about that location which often seems to blunt the energizing and disruptive power of the cross. This doesn't mean we are to become sectarian or separatist. But that the message of the cross "jars Christians loose from normal assumptions and expectations. It gives us an odd, quirky way of looking at the world, in whatever social location we find ourselves... The cross creates an internal dislocation and turbulence. It cuts across our normal hopes, dreams, and expectations for our own lives. It suggests that God's work in our lives emerges in the most surprising and unexpected ways: in the brokenness, the darkness, the loneliness, of our lives."

But there's more than just being odd, it's not merely countercultural, critical or negative. In all its strangeness, it speaks of "radical love and radical trust. It shows us just how far God is willing to go to show his love to us, in the life of Jesus who gives up his life for his friends. And it shows just how far humanity can go in trusting in the life of Jesus... The cross shatters our conventional understandings of what it means to love, of what propriety and decorum are all about. It breaks the boundaries that enclose how far we think God can be trusted. And it calls us to a profoundly different kind of life: loving, trusting, and risking more deeply than we otherwise would have thought possible."²

² Both of these long quotations are from James V. Brownson, Inagrace T. Dietterich, Barry A. Harvey, and Charles West, *Storm Front: The Good News of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 62-65.

Radically loving, trusting, and risking more deeply than we otherwise would have thought. That's God's way. That's the way of the cross. *This* is the way of the church of Jesus Christ, willing to go to great lengths in showing the radical reach of God's love, people who are willing to give of their lives for God's children, to demonstrate in the church the broad reach of God's arms of love. Why? Because *we know* the extent to which God has demonstrated that love toward us, we *all* stand within the embrace of those wide, outstretched arms. That's the good news. It's our joyful task to make sure everyone knows it.

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