

WE ARE THE CHURCH TOGETHER ... IN EVANGELISM

Philippians 2:1-13; Mark 2: 1-11
26th Sunday in Ordinary Time, a; September 25, 2011
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Prayer: O God, full of compassion, may our souls take refuge beneath the shadow of your wings; may our hearts find peace in you; and may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Today is the first day of our stewardship season, and each Sunday we will be focusing on our theme: We are the church....together, and highlighting a different area of our ministry that needs support. Today is evangelism. And so I would like to propose that the first act in our stewardship campaign would be to tear a hole in our roof! (You should see the eyes of our stewardship committee right now!)

I know of a church that did that. It was simply trying to be faithful to Christ's commission to spread the Gospel of God's love to the whole world. It was a Catholic church in Los Angeles back in the 80's. It had seen better days, and now it was surrounded by gangs, homeless folks, undocumented workers, lots of Latinos, drug and alcohol abusers. The priest there, Father Gregory (they just called him "G") opened the church so that the homeless could sleep there. About 100 every night, and there was always the faintest evidence that they had. Come Sunday morning, G and others would sprinkle I Love My Carpet on the rugs and vacuum like crazy, strategically placing potpourri and Air Wick around the church to combat the lingering, pervasive reminder that a hundred people had spent the night there. The only time they ever used incense in Delores Mission was on Sunday morning, before the 7:30 a.m. Mass crowd would arrive.

You can imagine the grumbling that set in, and people spoke of "churching" elsewhere.

The smell was never overwhelming, just undeniably there. The Jesuits figured that "if we can't fix it, we'll feature it." So he determined to address it in one of his homilies one Sunday. Homilies were often dialogues in those days, so one day Father G began with "What's the church smell like?"

G writes: "People are mortified, eye contact ceases, women are searching inside their purses for they know not what."

"Come on now," he insists. "What's the church smell like?"

“Huele a patas” (Smells like feet), Don Rafael boomed out. He was old and never cared what people thought.

“Excellent. But why does it smell like feet?”

“Cuz many homeless men slept here last night?” says a woman.

“Well, why do we let that happen here?”

“Es nuestro compromiso” (It’s what we’ve committed to do,) says another.

“Well, why would anyone commit to do that?”

“Porque es lo que haria Jesus.” (It’s what Jesus would do.)

“Well, then, what’s the church smell like now?”

A man stands and bellows, *“Huele a nuestro compromiso”* (It smells like commitment). The place cheers.

Guadalupe waves her arms wildly. *“Huele a rosas”* (smells like roses).

The packed church roars with laughter and a newfound kinship that embraced someone else’s odor as their own. The stink in the church hadn’t changed, only how the folks saw it. The people at Delores Mission had come to embody Wendell Berry’s injunction: “You have to be able to imagine lives that are not yours.”¹

In the gospel story we have today, Jesus is in a house so packed that no one can come through the door to get in. So the people open the roof and lower this paralytic down through it, so Jesus can heal him. The focus of the story is, understandably, the healing of the paralytic. Most sermons focus on Jesus’ compassion and his ability to forgive and to heal, as well they should. A few sermons focus on the paralytic, seeing the paralytic as a spiritual stand-in for Christians—whose lives are partially paralyzed. William Sloane Coffin asks “Whose hands are free, free to be extended to anyone? Whose feet are free to walk any path of life, free to walk out of that tight little protective circle of friends? Whose eyes are not fixed on some status symbol?”²

But there is something more significant happening here They are ripping the roof off the place, and those outside are being let in. Notice that not a word is recorded that the roof-ripper-offers spoke; they didn’t stand on a street corner and shout; they didn’t buttonhole strangers with 4 easy steps to salvation; they didn’t start a television ministry, but other than the disciples, they were the first evangelists in Jesus’ ministry.

Many of us, I know, have a hard time claiming our role as evangelists. (As a matter of fact, I am faced with a double whammy today: Stewardship and evangelism all wrapped up in one. Two of

our favorite topics!) We're a proud lot, and rightfully so. We focus on our actions, we say. We feed the hungry, we tutor children, we give to the needy, we provide programs for inner city children. We seem to be united around our vision in which justice speaks loudly and all who enter find a home. And it seems to be working. Though we are not a threat to the mega-churches, we're in better shape numbers-wise than we were a decade ago, quite a feat for an urban church these days.

But I want to warn us against smugness. You know "It doesn't bother us that we aren't as big as some others whose names we need not mention, but we emphasize outreach and we have a history, a tradition of opening our doors to everyone." But you recognize the smugness of that...the hint of pride? The word "evangelism" comes from the root word in Greek which means "good news," which must be passed on.

So how can we Presbyterians be evangelists...with integrity? The apostle Paul can help us out here. Now, if anybody was ever on fire with the gospel it was Paul. But there he was, sitting in a prison cell, writing "Do nothing from selfish ambition, or from conceit, and in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others." These words open the door to what is understood to be the right and satisfying relationship we would all want to have with God, with other people, with ourselves, and indeed with the whole world.

Paul knew that there were "others" both within the church community (for discord abounded; people were polarized, some felt disrespected and unloved, some were already starting to drop away...ah...the church) and people outside the church community that felt that those on the "inside" were a bit too...smug...too self-righteous...more favored than the "others."

So Paul calls for humility in sharing the Gospel. What does that look like? Christian humility looks like the willingness to welcome and embrace other people, especially those "on the outside," like the paralytic, those who feel excluded, neglected, or marginalized for whatever reason. It looks like a willingness to realize that even in our own Idlewild community there have been those who have drifted away through the years for any number of reasons. Some bring up their children here, become empty nesters, and wonder if there is a role for them anymore. Some long for the old days when we did things differently, change has been hard.

And humility looks like a willingness to learn from other people, especially those who might be different from ourselves. If I have heard it once, I have heard it a thousand times....the number of people who come to Idlewild and stay precisely because we are not all alike.

I think Paul would simply say, "Be the evangelist God has called you to be." It might mean coming on Thursday evening and worshipping with our homeless friends and sitting down and eating with them. It might mean touching base with your friends that you haven't seen for a while. It might mean letting your neighbors know what God is doing here. It might mean singing in the choir, using your gifts to share good news in ways that mere words don't. I don't know what it will look like for you, but I can guarantee that there are plenty of spiritual paralytics

yearning to hear a word of forgiveness, a word of healing, a word of challenge: “Take up your mat and walk,” a word of universal love, in short, good news...here in mid-town and throughout the metro area. Be the evangelist God is calling you to be.

And one way that we are asking all to consider...is through your pledges. Pledges are not written in stone. There might be times when you will not be able to fulfill your pledge. That has happened to me. But they help us plan our ministry for the next year. And it all goes to evangelism...sharing the good news. After all, it takes money to fix the roof after we tear it open!

I want to give a little addendum to that Catholic church that I started with. Father G began ministering to the gang members there in East Los Angeles (where there are over 86,000 gang members!) He started the homeboy industries, providing jobs for gang members, most of whom had been in detention centers or prison, visiting them in jails, starting a tattoo removal business next to the church, ESL classes, and more. As word got out, he was asked to speak around the country, including being honored at the White House. But whenever he went, he would take two “homeboys,” two former gang members to speak with him.

None of them had ever been on a plane before, of course, so when it came time for him to talk in Helena, Montana at the university there, he took Julian and Matteo. Both 19 years old, both had been imprisoned about four years. They made it there and saw snow for the first time, and it was obvious that Helena had not seen the likes of these two young men, and so they were interviewed by the local paper, appeared on the local television station, and when they spoke they received a standing ovation at the school.

The morning they were to leave they opened the newspaper and saw the headlines “GANG MEMBERS VISIT HELENA WITH A MESSAGE OF HOPE.” The “homies” can’t believe it. People in the hotel, in the restaurant, in the airport greet Matteo and Julian as celebrities. The TSA agents stop what they are doing and say “We give you a lot of credit.” “Congratulations on your courage.” They get in their seats on the plane and the flight attendants come over the loud speaker welcoming “the celebrities on board, Matteo and Julian.”

Around the middle of the trip, up in the air, Father G looks across the aisle where Julian is asleep with his head on Matteo’s shoulder. Matteo is crying. “What’s wrong, *mijo*?”

“I just read this article again.” He can’t speak for a second and then he puts his hand over his heart. “I don’t know. It really gets to me. Makes me feel like I am somebody.” He cries all the more. Father G leans over and whispers, “That’s because you *are* somebody.”

Matteo and Julian had never been “inside” before. Now a new place of fellowship has been forged, some roof in Montana has been ripped right open, and those outside have been let in. Father G writes “There is a brand new sense of a beloved community. This is always the fruit of true compassion.”³

Do you think we are ready to rip the roof open? One thing I do know...there are plenty of people *dying* to get in.

Amen.

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¹ Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*, New York: Free Press, 2010, pp. 72-74.

² William Sloane Coffin, *The Courage to Love*, New York: Harper and Row, 1982, p. 11.

³ Boyle, *op.cit.*, pp.78-80/