

01-25-09ⁱ

2 Kings 6:24-25; 7:3-9

Introduction

Once upon a time...in a small church—in a small town...a young man unexpectedly found himself serving as the chair of the congregation's 'Evangelism and Outreach' committee. You know how these things happen...You miss church for one Sunday, and suddenly you've been volunteered for something.

- Anyway, he was more-than-a-little nervous about the thought of having to go out and make evangelistic visits. So he talked to the pastor, who suggested that maybe prayer would help. "If you'll just take a few moments to talk with God before you visit someone," the pastor said, "I'm sure that the Lord will work things out."

Well a few weeks later, the church was having its regular business meeting...and it came time to hear the report from the 'Evangelism and Outreach' committee. And the young man said, "Pastor, I want to thank you for suggesting prayer. I tried it before I went on my visit this month, and it really worked."

- Of course, the pastor was thrilled—not only because his advice worked...but also because he hoped this might be the start of more 'evangelistic zeal' in the church—so he said to the young man, "Why don't you share your experience with the rest of the congregation so others will know the power of prayer?"
- "Well," the young man replied, "I prayed that people wouldn't be home...and they weren't!"

Transition

For better or worse, I suspect—that when it comes to evangelism—a lot of us feel the same way. I don't know exactly why that is...if the truth be told, the reasons and excuses that we might offer are probably as diverse as we are.

- It could be that the whole 'idea' of evangelism just seems a little outdated. After all, we live in such a 'tolerant and well-informed' age. The notion that we should try to go out and convince people to see the world (and their place in it) in a certain way...well, that just runs against the spirit of the times. Why, if folks want to know about God or Jesus or the Bible, they can always look 'em up on the Internet.
- Maybe we're nervous that people will think we're being pushy...or perhaps we're worried—that if we talk with others about faith—they'll ask us questions that we don't know how to answer.
- It's possible that we think all the people we know have already decided about faith...and they're either active church members or they're pretty committed to avoiding church.
- Maybe the topic never comes up...maybe we feel like we've got too many sins and shortcomings and questions of our own to want to go foisting them off onto someone else. Maybe we think, "That's the pastor's job!" Maybe all those things are at work...and yet.

And yet, there's that call of Jesus: "Go and make disciples of all the nations." (Mt. 28:19) There's that promise that he gives: "You will receive power...and you will be my witnesses." (Acts 1:8)

The Need

I believe pretty strongly that our church needs to spend some time thinking about evangelism. We need to think about it first and foremost because it is a command of our Lord...and, if we're honest with ourselves... it's a command that we're not obeying very successfully.

- I don't think it will sound too surprising for me to say this, but I do think that the church exists for more than just to 'get people saved' so that they can go to heaven when they die...and we'll be talking about that more in the weeks to come. But make no mistake—a big part of the reason we're here (at least, if we want to be biblical about it) is to help other people discover that God loves them...and that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself and no longer counting our sins against us.

- And if we're not helping people come to that life-changing awareness of God's grace (and judging from the number of people who 'profess faith' or 'get baptized' here...we're not)—then we need to ask ourselves why that is and what we can do to change it.

But in addition to the 'obedience and faithfulness' issues, we've got at least one other good reason to think about evangelism: We're getting ready to build a new church. I know that this whole 'building process' has probably taken a bit longer than some of you imagined it would...and I don't want to jump the gun and start making promises that I can't keep.

- But I think—that by March—our Building Committee will be ready to share with you a proposed design for our new facility and a plan for how we're going to build it. And I don't think I'd be giving too much away to say that the proposed sanctuary will seat a little more than 300 people on the main level (which is about 40 or 50 more than you could fit in this sanctuary if you really packed it out).
- So let me invite you to do the math. Right now, our sanctuary holds about 250...and we're getting ready to build a church that holds 300...and on a good Sunday, we might have 100 people in worship. So, if we don't start figuring out how to bear some more fruit; that beautiful new church is gonna feel mighty empty.

The Scope

Because of all this, what we're going to be doing over the next several weeks is taking a little 'worship journey' through this issue of evangelism. However...before you start thinking that I'm going to try to 'guilt-trip' you...and before you 'tune me out' because you think, "Pastor, I've heard it all before...been there/done that"...let me make it clear that I really want this series of messages to be about both something less than evangelism—and something more than evangelism.

It's something less than evangelism in the sense that it begins with the question: How do you involve people in the life of the church? I mean, let's put aside for a minute the issue how you answer people's questions about Christianity...or how you help them to confess their sins and make a commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord. Let's just start with the challenge of getting people to check out a Bible study or to visit in worship. How do you get them to 'hang out' enough with God's people that some of this 'Christian faith stuff' starts to rub off?

- Of course, the fascinating thing is—that you if can get people to do that—a lot of what we normally think of as 'evangelism' will take care of itself. Teachers a lot wiser than I am have suggested—that especially in a world that is as hungry for meaningful relationships as ours is—most people need to belong before they can believe. And frankly, I suspect that true Christian faith has always been caught more than taught.

But I hope, too, that these messages will be about something more than evangelism in this sense: Ultimately, I don't want us to stop at asking 'How can I get my friends to come to church?' or 'How can I convince people to get saved?' Instead, what I really want us to ask is:

- How do I nurture the passion and excitement and enthusiasm that I feel about being a child of God? Jesus said, "Those who drink the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give will be a spring within, gushing fountains of endless life." (Jn. 4:13-14) How do we have the kind of relationship with Christ that simply overflows to reach and bless the lives of those around us?

In a similar way, I hope these sermons will help us ask: How do we become the kind of church that glorifies God? How do we shape our lives together...so that—through us—God's kingdom comes and God's will gets done on earth as it is heaven?

- The bottom line, you see is: How can we have a contagious faith? And we begin figuring that out this morning by looking at a little-known story with a tremendous message that's found in the book of 2 Kings.

The Story

For our purposes this morning, we don't need to get too bogged down in historical details. Let's just note that the people of Israel are under attack. A neighboring country has laid siege to their city, and things are looking grim. The crops are gone; the trade routes have been cut off...and the people are beginning to starve.

- In fact, supplies are so low that a donkey's head sells for 80 shekels and a basket of seed pods (some translations say a basket of 'dove dung') is selling for 5 shekels. In today's terms, we might say that a little "filet of road kill" costs 80 bucks and a baggie of full sunflower seed shells will run you 5. The people are so hungry—that if you read the rest of the chapter—you find that some have resorted to cannibalism.
- And then—right smack dab in the middle of this horrible suffering—we meet four lepers.

Now let's remember that lepers are not exactly high society. Because of their disease, they're required by law to keep their distance from other people...which means they've got no homes... and they've got no jobs. All they can do to sustain themselves is scrounge and beg. So if the situation is bleak for the general population, it's twice as bad for the lepers.

- And as they sit by the city gate contemplating their fate, they say to one another: "What should we do? If we stay here, the famine is gonna kill us. If we go over to the enemy, they're gonna kill us. But maybe—just maybe—the enemy will show some mercy and let us live."
- It's a slim hope...but it's the only one they've got. So they wait for nightfall and sneak out of the city so that they can go and beg for mercy at the enemy camp.

But what the lepers don't know is that God has gone ahead of them. In the darkness of the night, the Lord has caused the enemy army to hear the sound of chariots and horses and marching infantry. And they are so convinced that they're coming under attack...the soldiers drop everything and flee—leaving their horses and donkeys and tents filled with provisions behind.

So when the lepers reach the camp...ready to fall to their knees and beg for their lives...there's no one there. They scratch their heads and look around and wonder what to do next. And finally—with nothing left to lose—they sneak over to one of the tents at the edge of the camp...and they quietly lift up the tent flap...and suddenly it's Christmas morning!

- Sitting before them—totally unprotected—is a tent filled with food and clothing and silver and gold. Of course, they don't know when the enemy soldiers might come back. So they jump inside and eat whatever they can get their hands on...and then they grab some supplies and rush off into the woods to hide them.
- And after awhile—when they see that no one has returned—they creep into another tent...and then another...and then another! And pretty soon, they've gorged themselves so completely that they can't eat another bite...and they've hidden so much treasure that they can retire and move to the Bahamas.
- And it's right about then that their conscience kicks in.

They turn to one another and say, "What we're doing is not right. This is a day of good news...and we are keeping it to ourselves. Let's go at once and report this to the royal palace." So they return to the city...and they share the good news. Of course, they're still lepers...so no one is ready to believe them at first. It might be a trap. The enemy might be hiding—just waiting for the people to leave the city so they can strike them down.

- But eventually, the king sends out a reconnaissance team...and finds things exactly as the lepers had said...and the people are saved.

The Point

Do you see where I'm headed? There's some news that's SO GOOD you just have to share it. Let's not forget: there are a lot of good reasons to share our faith: We witness because our Savior commanded it. We evangelize because we know that our Heavenly Father loves His children and we want our hearts to be more like His heart. We share our faith because the more we give it away, the stronger it grows.

But of all the compelling, biblical reasons for reaching out to others, the most natural (and therefore, the most essential) is that we just can't keep it to ourselves. Our faith becomes contagious. Our hearts overflow with joy...

- because we know how much God has given us...
- because we experience his Spirit and the love of His people...
- because we look forward with anticipation—to the day when He'll wipe every tear from our eyes and make all things new.

I like the way that Christian musician Stephen Curtis Chapman puts all this in a song called "Live Out Loud." The lyrics—at least, in part—go like this:

Imagine this: I get a phone call from Regis - he says "Do you want to be a millionaire?"
So they put me on the show and I win with two lifelines to spare.
Now picture this: I act like nothing ever happened...and bury all the money in a coffee can.
Well, I've been given more than Regis ever gave away.
I was a dead man who was called to come out of my grave. I think it's time for makin' some noise
Wake the neighbors! Get the word out!
Come on, crank up the music, climb a mountain and shout
This is life we've been given; it's made to be lived out...so, la, la, la, la, live out loud

The Question

So the real question we need to ask ourselves is: Is that the way we feel? Are we the recipients of such good news that we just can't keep it to ourselves?

- When it comes to our church...do we get encouragement from the friendships we have here? Are we spiritually fed and strengthened and challenged by our worship? Are we excited about the ways we get to serve the community and about the future that we're creating together?
 - Well...if so, who are we telling about it?
- When it comes to our relationship with God...do we realize that God so loved—not just 'the world'...but God so loved us—that He gave His only begotten Son?
 - Do we understand that He is with us always—even to the end of the age—and that there is nothing that can separate us from His love?
 - Do we 'get it' that through Him, we've been given power and purpose—a future and a hope—that will take the ordinary moments of our lives and make them extraordinary?
- And if we do, then are we ready to overflow? Are we willing to live a contagious faith?

I hope we are. And if we are (and maybe even if we're not) I'm going to ask you to do three things for me.

First, I'm going to ask you to do what you can to be here for worship during the month of February...because over the course of the next four weeks, we're going to look at what it takes to be a 'Contagious Christian'.

- Now I want to say right up front that I'm borrowing this terminology from Bill Hybels, the pastor of Willow Creek Community Church just outside Chicago, Illinois. Hybels offers a framework for thinking about 'how we can share our faith' that I really like. So in addition to using that framework to structure what I'm going to share with you in the coming weeks, I've also included it in your bulletin this morning.
- He suggests that Contagious Christians—or Christians who have "Maximum Impact"—are those who have High Potency...and Close Proximity...and Clear Communication.
- Of course...right now, those terms may not mean a whole lot to you. But that's why I'm asking you to be here...so that we can discover together what 'Contagious Christianity' is all about.

The second thing I'm going to ask you to do is to pray...but not to pray in some vague, general way. No, I want you to pray for something specific.

If you've looked at the prayer list on the back of your bulletin today, you may have already noticed that there's an unusual little addition down at the bottom: three 'blanks' followed by some brief prayer requests.

- What I'm asking you to do is to pick three people that you can be praying for while we focus on this topic. These can be people who don't have a relationship with Christ...or who people aren't involved in a local church. They can be people whose 'spiritual condition' you don't really know much about...or people who are good friends...but who you don't often talk to about 'deeper things'—like God or church or faith.
- And during the coming month, I'd like you to pray for those people: Pray that God will be at work in their hearts to draw them closer to Himself (which, when you get right down to it, is a pretty good prayer to pray for anybody.) And pray, too, that God will create opportunities for you to serve them...or invite them to church...or speak with them about things that matter.

And then the last thing that I'd like you to do...is to pray for yourself and this church. Pray that God will give us the gift of a contagious faith—the gift of a relationship with Him that is such good news, we just can't keep it to ourselves.

The Conclusion

Now—you might be thinking to yourself, "But pastor, I don't really feel that way." I don't have a relationship with God overflows into the lives of others. I like our church...but I don't really feel so strongly about it that I can't wait to tell others how much they need to check it out. What am I supposed to do about that?"

Well as we close this morning, let me remind you that it's not that complicated:

- Jesus said, "Have no fear little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." (Lk. 12:32) Paul said, "The gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." (Rom. 6:23)
- And so if we want to experience the abundant life that scripture promises...if we want to have a contagious faith...the first and best thing we can do is...to ask for it. "Ask and it will be given; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened." (Lk. 11:9)
 - Won't you ask this morning for Jesus to fill your heart?
 - Won't you ask God to knit your life into the life of this church?
 - Won't you ask for a contagious faith...and then just watch to see what God will do?

Our hymn of response is "The Savior Is Waiting"--#329. Let's stand as we sing.

ⁱ Title: *A Contagious Faith*. First in a five-part series on "Becoming a Contagious Christian."