

Streetsville United Church

Sunday, March 8, 2020

Rev. John Tapscott

## “DON'T BE AFRAID OF THE 'E' WORD”

John 3:1-17

I want to tell you something about myself. Some of you may realize it; others perhaps not. But here it is. I am an evangelist. My sermons, most of them, have an evangelistic element to them. In the congregational survey about a new minister, the minister as evangelist was way down the list. Now that either means you want a drastic change from the way I preach, or more likely, you were reacting negatively to the word evangelist or evangelism. When the congregational survey was done 20 years ago, I'm guessing the minister as evangelist had a similar low rating. Yet for nearly twenty years you've had an evangelist in the pulpit.

But all true Christian preaching is evangelistic. Evangel means “good news”, and “evangelism” means proclaiming and spreading the good news. The evangel is the good news about what God has done for us, is doing for us, and promises to us through his Son Jesus Christ. The best known evangelistic text is John 3:16 which we heard in our reading.

Now I understand why we shy away from the word evangelism. It brings to mind images of a certain kind of hell-fire and brimstone preaching, in which high emotion and open conversions are often on display. And we feel uncomfortable with that. I get it.

A man on an ocean cruise fell overboard. He was floundering in the water, shouting and waving to get the attention of those on board. A lawyer spotted him and shouted, "Shall I sue the cruise line on your behalf?" A politician saw him and promised to push forth a bill in parliament to make sailing safer. Finally, an evangelist saw him and said with a smile, "Yes, brother I see your hand," Then taking a wider scan of the ocean the evangelist asked, "Now, do I see another?"

Or the word evangelism sometimes brings to mind the television evangelists, some of whom are good and some not so good and really turn us off. Thankfully we can turn them off. And we know that a few high profile evangelists have gotten into trouble over money or sexual scandal.

Now one evangelist who serves as a model is the late Billy Graham. Whether or not you agreed with his style, one had to admire his sincerity, his commitment to Biblical truth and his genuine concern for saving souls. There was never a hint of scandal around Billy Graham regarding money or sexual impropriety. As much as it can be said about a flawed and fallen human being, Billy Graham was a good and righteous man.

Now I should say that even my low-key evangelistic preaching often includes a question or two which may lead you to examine your heart and make a spiritual decision in favour of Christ. And

even if you are already a believer, such questions can help strengthen your faith or get your faith back on track if you're losing focus. We all need that sometimes, myself included.

Today I want to say a good word about evangelism. I've titled the sermon, "Don't be afraid of the 'e' word" and here's some reasons why we don't need to fear it.

*First, because Jesus himself was an evangelist.*

Jesus taught, proclaimed and lived God's Good News. Everywhere he went, he spoke of God's present and coming Kingdom. He taught God's truth. He gave people hope. He saw and responded to those others overlooked, the poor and the marginalized. He lifted heavy burdens from peoples' spirits and bodies; he healed diseases and drove out demons. Jesus declared the forgiveness of sins and even raised the dead. Jesus himself was the prime evangelist.

In today's reading Nicodemus came to Jesus by night for some spiritual clarification. He had heard Jesus' teaching, and he had seen the godly works Jesus was doing. He knew God was with Jesus. Jesus spoke of about the possibility of a person being born from above, that is, born again spiritually. It could happen to someone even as old as Nicodemus. Jesus spoke about the work of the Holy Spirit giving this new birth how and when the Spirit chooses. And Jesus told Nicodemus this wonderful good news, which is the heart of the Gospel. John 3:16,17. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but so that the world might be saved through him."

Look at the wonderful Good News in these verses. These words proclaim God's love for the world, for all of us, for you and for me. God loves you, not because you have earned it or deserve it, but because God is love. These words tell us of God's gift – his only Son, Jesus Christ, born at Bethlehem to share our human nature, to live a sinless life, given over to death on the Cross as our sin bearer, raised from the grave, and lifted up to the Father's right hand in glory.

You see, the bad news is that our sins would cause us to perish apart from Holy God forever. Our fate apart from Christ was hopeless, dark, death and hell. And we could do nothing to reverse our direction. But through Christ God has opened the way to new and eternal life, given us hope and the promise of everlasting glory. And now everyone who embraces the Son by faith receives new and eternal life through him. They are taken from the low road leading to destruction and put on the highway to heaven. In Christ you and I have been set in a new direction. This is good news. God's desire is not to condemn the world, which it richly earned by its rebellion against God, but to save the world through Christ, who is God's gift of grace. "He gave his only Son."

Jesus not only proclaimed this good news, he lived it; actually incarnated it. He pointed to himself as the good news. "I am the light of the world." "I am the resurrection and the life." "I am the bread of life." "I am the Good Shepherd." "I am the way and the truth and the life."

This is what made Jesus' opponents angry - that he made himself the message, equal to God. Well, he didn't make himself equal to God, he was equal to God and he was God, right from the very beginning. "In the beginning was the word and the word was with God, and the word was

God...and the word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.” “I am the Father am one,” said Jesus. But they couldn’t grasp it and drove him to the cross for his supposed blasphemy.

We shouldn’t be afraid of the “e” word because Jesus was himself an evangelist. Even more Jesus himself is the evangel, the good news. To point to Jesus, however you do it, is to be an evangelist. Evangelism is all about Jesus. And why should we be afraid of Jesus? For he came to cast out our fear by his perfect love.

*Here’s a second reason we should not be afraid of the ‘e’ word. It’s because all Christians come to faith through evangelism.*

In verse 3, Jesus said to Nicodemus, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above.” And in verse 7, “Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above,’” or in some translations, “born again.” Some Christians refer to themselves as being “born again” and that’s fine. They likely had a radical and rapid change in their beliefs and lifestyle. They heard the Gospel, received Jesus and it all happened in the twinkling of an eye. Thank God for it. “The wind of the Spirit blows how it chooses...”

But in truth all believing Christians are “born from above” or “born again,” even if we hesitate to describe ourselves that way. No one comes into this world as a believer in Jesus Christ. I know that children often have an openness to God and a sense of spiritual wonder that is lacking in adults. But coming to saving faith in Christ requires two things - the preaching or sharing of the Gospel, and the work of the Holy Spirit in a person’s heart and mind as he or she hears it.

Some natural births happen very quickly; some happen over a longer period. But either way, a child is born. Similarly, some of us come to faith in Christ in an instant. For others it happens over a longer period of time. Many people hear the Gospel message dozens of times before they finally come to faith in Jesus Christ. The devil has his ways of blinding our eyes, hardening our hearts and closing our minds. That’s why “no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ without the Holy Spirit. But whether it’s long time or short, the goal of evangelism and the Spirit’s work is the same – to bring about saving faith in Jesus Christ. So in that sense all believers in Christ are “born from above,” or “born again.” We have all had a spiritual rebirth. As Peter says, “We have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”

Don’t be afraid of the ‘e’ word because everyone of us who claims Christian faith has been evangelized. The good news of Jesus was shared with us in some way and then the Spirit went to work bringing faith alive in us. And I won’t ask you to raise your hand, but I do ask you to honestly examine your heart for faith in God and trust in Jesus Christ his Son. And my prayer is that the Holy Spirit will kindle and strengthen such faith in everyone of us here.

*Finally, don’t be afraid of the ‘e’ word because it’s how the church grows.*

Now the church sometimes grows through catchy programs or the personality of the preacher, or through the social outreach and warmth of the congregation. These things can help.

But solid and lasting church growth always happens through evangelism, as the good news of Jesus is proclaimed and shared. On the day of Pentecost Peter preached the Gospel of the crucified and Risen One in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit cut people to the heart. That day, three thousand were baptized and added to the growing church. And still today the church grows when Jesus Christ is proclaimed. Jesus said, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." Now the Spirit blows where he chooses. But we can be sure that where Jesus is lifted up in the fullness of his stature as crucified Saviour and risen Lord, the Spirit blows in that direction. The Spirit kindles and bring alive faith in peoples' hearts. The church grows.

Don't be afraid of the 'e' word for it is how disciples are made and how real growth happens. So each church has to discover its own unique way of doing it. And do it we must, for Jesus said, "Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations...baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you..."

Now we are people formed and shaped by the Gospel. We are bearers of the Good News. And each of us has a role in this ministry of evangelism. It can be very simple. Peter tells us to always be ready to gently give a reason for the hope that is in us. The reason is simple – it's because of Jesus. Be ready to name that precious name when someone asks you about the hope you hold. Another simple thing you can do is to invite someone to come to church with you. Perhaps they will attend; and perhaps they won't, but you've planted the seed, and someday the Spirit may blow in that person's direction and the seed will start to sprout. And just by attending and supporting the church you are playing a role in the church's ministry of evangelism.

Don't be afraid of evangelism. We don't need less of it; we need more. It's how the church grows and we all have a role to play. And remember that whatever God calls us to do, he also equips us to do. So when it comes to the "e" word I believe we can hear Jesus saying to us, "Fear not."