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Pentecost 3

Sisters and brothers in Christ, let us pray...may the words of my mouth and meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

So, sisters and brothers in Christ, today's gospel reading is about evangelism.

And, for Lutherans, to talk about evangelism, let alone to do evangelism, is about as much fun as a root canal.

For Lutherans, evangelism might as well be a four-letter word, for as much angst as it brings to many.

Evangelism might as well be relegated to the circular file, for all the disinterest it creates among us Lutherans.

Lutherans have a great tendency to be averse to evangelism.

Lutherans shy away from evangelism, avoid evangelism, hide from evangelism almost at all costs.

And I wonder, is it somehow in our DNA—this phobia towards evangelism?

Is it somehow instilled in us unknowingly—this dread of evangelism?

I don't know.

But it is real.

PAUSE

I remember hearing a statistic with respect to Lutherans and evangelism.

This was many, many years ago, but I can hardly imagine the statistic has improved.

I am actually inclined to believe that it has probably gotten worse.

Anyway, several years back, I heard this statistic.

That on average, a Lutheran will invite another person to church once every 26 years.

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I have to chuckle, because when I think about that statistic these many years later, my thought is “that would be really good if a Lutheran invited at least one person to church even once every 26 years.”

But, let me assure you, I have not become too cynical.

PAUSE

But, we do have to wonder, why Lutherans, now mind you, not all Lutherans are stricken with anxiety when it comes to evangelism...

But we do have to wonder why Lutherans in general have an aversion to evangelism?

Now, the funny thing is, the word “evangelical” is front and center in the name of the larger church of which Lutherans belong in this country.

We are part of The EVANGELICAL Lutheran Church in America.

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Seems a bit ironic, perhaps?

Sometimes in my more sarcastic moments, I think it would be more apropos, to have named the church The Shy or Timid Lutheran Church in America.

PAUSE

Now, maybe part of the problem is that when we think of evangelism, we think of what are called “cold visits,” visits to people we don’t know, knocking on people’s doors out of the blue, almost like a surprise attack.

Knock, knock. (The door opens.)

“Surprise! I am your neighborhood Gospel Ninja, come to tell you about Jesus Christ. WAHAA.”

PAUSE

Or maybe, when we think about evangelism, we think about what we were told growing up.

Some adult no doubt told us, “There are three things you never discuss in polite company—money, politics, and religion.”

So one should probably not start a conversation by saying, “So, I hear you’re a miser, who believes in the death penalty. So, let me tell you about my ultra liberal church. You might want to come visit us some Sunday.”

“Or, I hear you’re a spendthrift, who hugs trees. Let me tell you about my ultra conservative church. You might want to join once I tell you about us.”

Neither is an example of how to win friends and influence people.

Or maybe when we think about evangelism, we think about the gospel reading for this morning.

Hardly encouraging words from Jesus.

“I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves.”

“Beware! For you can be expected to be whipped. You can be expected to be betrayed by family. You can be expected to be hated by all.”

Lovely. Sounds just like the sort of fun we are looking for, doesn’t it?

No, thank you, Jesus.

PAUSE

So, what are we to do with this concept of evangelism?

How are we to tell others about Jesus?

How are we to give witness to the Christian faith?

PAUSE

Now, if Jesus had given us authority like he did to his disciples of his day...

I mean, if Jesus had given us authority so as to cast out unclean spirits...

...if Jesus gave us the ability to cure every disease and every sickness...

Well, that would be one thing.

Indeed, when the disciples are sent out to evangelize, they are told by Jesus to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons.

Cool. With such powers, evangelism would be like being a superhero.

Superman and superwoman, step aside.

Here comes "Gospel Man" and "Gospel Woman."

We could all wear a capital "G" on our chests.

Although, I am not so keen on the whole leotards thing, but if I must.

So, yes, we read this gospel passage and we think, "Sure, Jesus, give us these powers, and evangelism would be easy."

PAUSE

But the more and more I think about it, evangelism is that easy, or at least it should be.

For, you see, when it comes to evangelism, I think Jesus was astute in what is called Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

Now, obviously, Abraham Maslow, who was an American psychologist who lived in the 20th century, came way after Jesus, and so Jesus would not have heard of Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

But, Jesus being Jesus, the Son of God, who is to say Jesus didn't know Maslow's theory.

After all, ALL things came into being, even Maslow, through the Word, Jesus Christ.

But, I digress.

My point being that Jesus understood intuitively this theory, this idea of the hierarchy of needs, which says, "You don't try to evangelize people when they are hungry and starving, or when they are sick and infirmed, or when they are destitute and despairing."

You don't withhold care and comfort and compassion, so as to begin a conversation about Jesus and the Gospel.

You don't say, "Are you familiar with the Good News of Jesus Christ?"

While the other is saying, "Hello, I could use a little help here."

PAUSE

No, you address the physical, medical, emotional needs of individuals before you address their spiritual needs.

There is, in other words, a hierarchy.

And it is Abraham Maslow who is credited with having developed this theory, even though, Jesus was already doing it long before Maslow appeared in history.

Jesus is telling his disciples in this Gospel lesson that they are to address the physical, emotional, and mental well-being of those they come across.

Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.

And then, then you can talk to them, hopefully, about the Gospel.

Although Jesus recognizes that even then some will not be responsive.

Jesus, says, "If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town."

In other words, move on. For at this point it is up to the Spirit to work on the individual's heart.

It is enough for us to share the message, but it is the Spirit that changes the person.

PAUSE

But, let me back up a moment and say that I think Jesus in his ministry actually improved upon Maslow's theory, whereby Jesus does not separate out the physical needs, the emotional needs, the mental needs, and the spiritual needs of individuals, and set up a hierarchy.

No, often when Jesus heals individuals of physical infirmities, Jesus says, "Your faith has made you well."

"Your faith has made you well."

And so, Jesus implies that one's spirituality is always closely linked with healing in general.

You can't really separate out the various needs of individual and for those needs into a hierarchy.

To some extent, modern hospitals recognize this in what is deemed "wholistic healing," whereby hospitals recognize chaplains as part of the care team.

But even more simply put, what Jesus seems to be getting at is that any kind of healing is indeed spiritual by nature.

Healing, whatever form that takes, is a matter of spirituality.

The apostle Paul subscribes to this, when, in II Corinthians 5, he likens the work of a Christian to that of an ambassador.

He says, "God who reconciled us to himself through Christ has given us the ministry of reconciliation. In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself. So we are ambassadors for Christ, for God is making his appeal through us."

In other words, Paul is saying, God is healing (a synonym for reconciliation)...

God is healing the world through Christ and the cross.

And God has given us the ministry of healing.

So, we are ambassadors, and God is making his appeal, his witness of healing for the world through us...

Healing then is our evangelism.

Let me say that again, "Healing is our evangelism."

And, so when I think about how we are to do evangelism in the world, it is quite simple, or at least it should be.

It is not about how can I get this person whom I am talking to...it is not first and foremost how can get his or her butt in the pews.

It is not about how I can add this person to the membership rolls.

It is about what sort of healing is needed in that other person's life.

And evangelism then, as I see it, is not about our monopolizing the conversation so as to talk about Jesus, but instead it is about listening, deeply listening to the other to hear their pain, their vulnerability, and then responding by being an agent, an instrument of God's love and compassion.

So, healing is the simple answer to evangelism, because in the process of accompanying another in their journey of healing there is faith, there is hope, there is the stuff of the Gospel, even if we are not necessarily saying, "Let me tell you about Jesus."

But, yes, entering the vulnerability of another person can be challenging, because it may mean, often does mean, that we ourselves have to become vulnerable.

Entering the healing place of another often does remind us of our own ongoing healing process.

For whether we like it or not, we are all works in progress.

None of us has achieved that place where there is no more healing work to be done.

We all are healing.

PAUSE

So, with this said, let us go out into the world and be ever, EVER mindful and alert to where there is need of healing in others.

And be that superhero. Be that Gospel Man and that Gospel Woman, who shows love and compassion, and who then reveals the Good News of Jesus Christ with the healing power of Christ.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.