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St. Stephen/Our Saviour
Pentecost 7
July 7, 2024

Sisters and brothers in Christ, let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the 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 when we hear that word "evangelism" we probably cringe, or shudder, or squirm.

Why? Because most of us are probably uncomfortable with the idea of "evangelism."

Most of us, probably, want nothing to do with evangelism, if it means engaging other people around the topic of God, if it means talking about our faith, if it means asking people what they believe.

Most of us want none of that.

You just don't talk about those things in casual conversation, right?

It makes people uncomfortable. It makes us uncomfortable.

And so, when I say, "evangelism," we either tune out, or shut down, or we become completely catatonic.

PAUSE

But Jesus won't let us off so easy.

Indeed, Jesus called his 12 closest disciples and sent them out two by two.

And so, I don't know why we think we can avoid talking about and doing "evangelism."

PAUSE

Now, our word "evangelism" actually comes from the Greek, "euangelion," which means "good news."

And it was a word that was used in the Roman Empire to speak about the good news associated with the Emperor.

Indeed, there was an inscription excavated in 1899 called the Priene Inscription.

This inscription on stone was found in Priene, an ancient Greek city located in western Turkey.

And the inscription details the edict that established the new Roman calendar beginning with the year of Emperor Augustus' birth.

A similar inscription has been found in other locations as well, so it seems the edict was widely circulated and adopted.

All the provincial calendars across the Roman Empire had to align with the edict.

So what did the inscription in Priene say exactly?

Just this: “Since Providence, which has ordered all things and is deeply interested in our life, has set in most perfect order by giving us Augustus, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit humankind, sending him as a savior, both for us and for our descendants, that he might end war and arrange all things, and since he, Caesar, by his appearance (excelled even our anticipations), surpassing all previous benefactors, and not even leaving to posterity any hope of surpassing what he has done, and since the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the good tidings (the beginning of the good news—the εὐαγγέλιον] for the world that came by reason of him.”

So the term εὐαγγέλιον was used at the time of the Roman Empire to herald the good news of the arrival of a kingdom - the reign of a king (the emperor) that brought war to an end, so that all people of the world who surrendered and pledged allegiance to this emperor would be granted salvation from destruction.

The Calendar Inscription of Priene speaks of the birthday of Emperor Augustus as the beginning of the gospel announcing his kingdom, with a Roman edict to start a new calendar system based on the year of Augustus's birth.

Now, if we took note, we see that the wording in the inscription is suspiciously similar to the declaration about Jesus.

Mark's gospel begins with the words, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God..."

The Priene inscription says, "The birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the good news for the world..."

The inscription also speaks of Providence giving us Augustus, that he might benefit all mankind, sending him as a SAVIOR.

Words that could be used, were used, to speak of Jesus.

The Gospel of Luke describes an angel of the Lord talking with shepherds, and the angel says, "Behold, I bring you good news of great joy for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

And just as the Priene inscription announced a lasting "peace" with the arrival of Emperor Augustus...

The text says Augustus was sent "that he might end war..."

Just as the Priene inscription announces peace, so do the angels sing of peace to the shepherds in the field, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace and good will among men."

So, our term "evangelism" was used to speak of the Roman Emperor, and it was taken over by the early Christians to speak of Jesus.

Today, we use the word "evangelism" to speak of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with other people.

PAUSE

We evangelize.

We share the gospel, we share the good news, and so in effect we could say that we gospelize.

PAUSE

But, what does evangelism look like today?

The gospel says the disciples went out on a journey two by two, wearing sandals and a tunic, but for us this seems quite archaic.

Not to mention, we as evangelists are hardly going to impose upon other people so that those other people put us up for the night, as our gospel text says.

No, times have changed. And the way we do evangelism has changed.

And when it comes to evangelism, most of us are content with just making sure our WORSHIP TIMES are well publicized on the marquis out front, and on the church's website, and on the church's answering machine.

PAUSE

But some of us may be bold enough to talk with another about the church we attend.

And that is a very good entrée into evangelism, that is, to talk about why it is that we come to church.

Make note of this.

We don't have to know a lot about the Bible to evangelize.

We don't have to know a lot of church doctrine, or church history to evangelize.

Indeed, we often make evangelism more daunting than it is.

It is enough to be able to speak about why it is that we come to church.

To be able to speak enthusiastically on this topic—why we come to church—is a great entrance point into evangelism.

Why are we members of this church?

What brings us back week after week?

Why have we made a commitment to serving here among these people?

PAUSE

And so in response there questions, maybe we talk about the COMMUNITY here at Our Saviour/St. Stephen?

Maybe we talk about the caring and hospitable community here—we talk about the persons who are our siblings in Christ.

Maybe we talk about the things we do, for example the GermanFest event, the egg making project, and the host weeks here for Family Promise.

(Maybe we talk about the things we do, for example, the community meals, the Dinner with Friends, the Eucharistic Ministry, the Youth Events, and the Trunk or Treat event.)

And in talking about these things, we express the blessings and joy we experience through that service.

Maybe we talk about the learning we experience in Sunday School and in Bible Study, and we note how our everyday lives are the better for it.

Yes, we need to be able to talk comfortably about our Faith life, which is to say, we talk about our church life.

We need to be able to articulate why we are a part of this congregation, should the opportunity present itself.

Yes, we need to take advantage of those opportunities to talk about our Faith life and church life, WHEN the time comes, and the only way to do that is to have thought out what we would say in advance.

PAUSE

For just imagine, someone is talking with us about their life or life in general.

And that someone says that “all sense of community has really suffered because of COVID,” or “suffered because of technology, that people are on their devices too much.”

“That people do not engage in community like before.”

And we can respond by saying, “That is why I feel so blessed to be part of a wonderful community.”

“What community is that?” the person might say.

And we can say, “The community at Our Saviour/St. Stephen.”

“What’s that? What do they do?” And voila, there you have it.

The opportunity to speak about the church.

But the trick I think is to have “the church” in the forefront of our minds, not on some back burner.

We need to have our “spiel” our “sales pitch” at the ready.

PAUSE

I am willing to bet that there are numerous occasions where in the course of the day we could have slipped in a conversation about our church with other persons, and we didn’t do so.

And I am not talking about being afraid to do so.

No, what I am talking about is that we didn’t even see the opportunity, because we don’t have “the church” in the forefront of our minds.

PAUSE

What would our evangelism look like for us as a church if everyday each of us woke up and the first thing that entered our mind is this prayer, “God, make me an instrument of your good news. Help me to see those occasions when I can talk about my faith life, my church life. And when those occasions present themselves, empower me to speak up. Amen.”

What if we were to pray that prayer every morning?

“God, make me an instrument of your good news. Help me to see those occasions when I can talk about my faith life, my church life. And when those occasions present themselves, empower me to speak up. Amen.”

What would happen do you think?

It would change us.

How?

1) Well first, it would put evangelism at the forefront of our minds. If we became diligent about praying this prayer the first thing every morning how could it do otherwise?

Yes, we might need a reminder. A written note by our bedside. A recurring memo on our phone. But with a little practice it would become our own edict, like the changing of the Roman calendar by the Priene inscription.

2) Second, praying this prayer would force us to look intentionally for those opportunities to evangelize.

You see, if we are praying for God to use us to be an instrument for God's good news, and asking God help us see opportunities to evangelize, well then we can trust that God will respond.

And the way God will respond is by us actually looking for opportunities.

3) And third and finally, praying this prayer also forces us to think about what we will say when the opportunity presents itself.

Again, if we are praying to God to empower us to speak, well then we need to have thought in advance about what words we will say.

So if we are serious about evangelism, I think this is the route we need to take.

We need to pray about it, every day, and the first thing every day, so that evangelism becomes foremost in our mind.

And we need to be on the lookout for evangelism opportunities.

And when those opportunities come, we need to be at the ready with the words we need to say.

And if we do these things, maybe just maybe, we won't find ourselves cringing, or shuddering, or squirming whenever the word "evangelism" is mentioned.

Thanks be to God. Amen.