

Evangelism: You Alone Can Do It, But You Cannot Do It Alone

2 Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13

I know it's the wrong holiday. But our Gospel text today begs me to tell you about a certain Peanuts comic strip. It's about the "Great Pumpkin" even if we just celebrated the Fourth of July this week and not Halloween. Linus has an obsession with the "Great Pumpkin." Linus convinces Charlie Brown to help him convince others that the "Great Pumpkin" is coming. He says, "People *have* to know about the great Pumpkin... You'll be doing them a great *service*, Charlie Brown." Linus proposes they go door to door sharing this good news. Linus then offers to take one side of the street and Charlie Brown the other.

Charlie Brown is not really very eager to take on this task. He mumbles to himself about how embarrassing it is. He goes to the first house, rings the bell, and gives his spiel. "Good morning! I'm here to tell you about the great Pumpkin. On Halloween night, the Great Pumpkin rises out of the pumpkin patch and brings toys to all the children in the world!" Charlie Brown is so pleased with himself. "I did it!" he says. "But I'm sure glad no one opened the door."

Jesus advises his disciples today to go out in mission, two by two, not unlike Linus and Charlie Brown. He warns his disciples about the perils and pitfalls of this work. It's no coincidence that Jesus' instructions to his disciples follow right after the story of his own rejection at Nazareth. That prepares the disciples for a hostile reception in *their* work. Is that what Charlie Brown feared? Is that what *we* fear when it comes to sharing our faith? Is that what we fear when it comes to the E word? Evangelism?

Today we have a wonderful opportunity to begin a discussion about the challenges of Evangelism in our time and place. And it might start with a conversation between our Gospel and our second reading. In our second reading, Paul writes to the Christians at Corinth about a handicap of his – a "thorn in the flesh." Spiritually speaking, Paul has much to brag about. But, he says, "So I wouldn't get a big head, I was given the *gift* of a handicap to keep me in constant touch with my limitations. At first, I didn't think of it that way. I begged to get rid of it. And God told me, 'My grace is enough; it's all you need. My strength comes into its own in your weakness.' Once I heard that," Paul says, "I was glad to let it happen. I quit focusing on the handicap and began appreciating the gift. It was a case of Christ's strength moving in on my weakness. Now I take limitations in stride, and with good cheer, these limitations that cut me down to size – abuse, accidents, opposition, bad breaks. I just let Christ take over! And so, the weaker I get, the stronger I become."¹

You may know that in Chinese, the figure for crisis has two parts to it: one is danger, the other is opportunity. For people of faith, for followers of Jesus, any crisis, while it may certainly be a danger, can also be an opportunity for God's grace to enter, take root, and bear fruit we could never imagine otherwise. It takes surrendering to this paradox: You alone can do it, but you cannot do it alone.²

So today, as our Gospel beckons us to talk about evangelism, I want you to grasp what a danger and an opportunity are before us as church these days. The danger is that the church as we have known it is in decline. It's not just St. John's. It's not just the Episcopal Church; it's the Lutheran, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches too.³ And it should be noted that not all Christian churches are in decline: Roman Catholic, Mormon, and Pentecostal churches have grown. We could wring our hands here, but I find enormous opportunity in this crisis. And you should too. St. John's is poised to reverse the Episcopal trend, at least in Greater Plymouth. This community needs this church. You're the best kept secret around. You alone can do it. But you cannot do it alone.

And here's some intriguing news. This is from a now famous essay by author and speaker Rachel Held Evans. It's called *Why Millennials Are Leaving the Church*. "Time and again," she says, "the assumption among Christian leaders... is that the key to drawing twenty-somethings back to church is simply to make a few style updates – edgier music, more casual services, a coffee shop in the fellowship hall, a pastor who wears skinny

jeans...But here's the thing: having been *advertised to* our whole lives, we millennials... are not easily impressed with consumerism or performances. Many of us, myself included, are finding ourselves increasingly drawn to high church traditions – precisely because the ancient forms of liturgy seem so unpretentious, so unconcerned with being “cool,” and *we* find that refreshingly authentic. What millennials really want from the church is not a change in style but a change in substance,” she says. And then she goes into a litany that describes the gifts of *this* congregation. She concludes, “We’re not leaving the church because we don’t find the cool factor there; we’re leaving the church because we don’t find *Jesus* there. Like every generation before ours and every generation after, deep down, we long for Jesus.”^{iv}

Jesus is here. God’s spirit is here. I believe that the challenges you face are not at all unlike the handicap Paul talks about in our second reading – the thorn in the flesh, the things that humble you and compel you to quit focusing on the handicap and appreciate the gift: to fully rely on God to guide you into a vibrant, faithful future.

The common thread in all this may very well go back to that rejection of Jesus in his home town. “Familiarity breeds contempt,” as the saying goes. We perceive one another through filters. We bring our own experiences and our own expectations into any encounter. We can’t help it. “Isn’t that the carpenter’s son?” they said. Isn’t that the church on Sheldon next to West Middle School?

We have neighbors, thousands of people ten miles or less from this space. How are you going to let them know who you really are? What would it take for you to invite a friend or co-worker here? What points of engagement might you offer so they can begin to get to know you and Jesus? What kind of an on-ramp might you construct so they might become deeply rooted with you and with Jesus in authentic and meaningful ways? As rector and staff come and go, how will you own the ministry of your church?

What an exciting time to be St. John’s -- Plymouth’s Episcopal Church. Jesus is here. Jesus is here in this community gathered, he’s here in Word and Song, in Bread and Wine, in caring and connections among you and the hurting world beyond these walls. He’s in you when you leave his table to be his presence in the world in your work and in your play, in your family life and friendships. He can hardly wait for you to let the world know. You alone can do it. But you cannot do it alone.

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Sources

ⁱ 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 in *The Message (The Bible in Contemporary Language)* by Eugene Peterson

ⁱⁱ O. Hobart Mowrer, quoted by Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham, in *The Spirituality of Imperfection: Storytelling and the Journey to Wholeness*, New York, Bantam Books, 1992, p. 185.

ⁱⁱⁱ David Goodhew, “Facing Episcopal Church Decline” in *The Living Church* <https://livingchurch.org/covenant/2017/07/24/facing-episcopal-church-decline/>

^{iv} Rachel Held Evans, Belief Blog “Why Millenials Are Leaving the Church,” to CNN, <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2013/07/27/why-millennials-are-leaving-the-church/>