

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, we come to your house to worship you, to prepare for the coming week, to reorient our minds and hearts in a world full of distraction. This world pulls us apart and makes us focus on individuality at the expense of the community and the other you call us to unceasingly care for. We come to this place to remember that we are one people in one mission in this place and across the whole world. We realize this as we lift up our prayers to your, Gracious God, who hears all the joys, sorrows, and supplications of our hearts. We lift up all those prayers spoken and unspoken in this space, and we know you hear them. Walk with us in our strength and our weakness to be your hands and feet.

God, we recognize this world objectifies your beloved creation in seeing them more as a means to an end rather as ends in themselves. We are seen as consumers, as objects, not as those whom God has lovingly created and walks with through all the days of their lives, whether they recognize it or not. Guide us to witness to your work and appreciate that you move in ways that we often cannot realize until much later. We pray all these things in the name of our example and guide in faithful relationship, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray as one community...

SERMON

Hello, general person. No, don't bother telling me your name. Let me tell you about the word of the Lord. You're probably a sinner, and you don't know what to do with your life. In order that I can save you, you should come more often to Faith United Methodist Church to hear the true word of God. Now what I will ask you is where your church membership is, but let's go ahead and get that changed as soon as possible, then you might be on the right track. Praise be to God who loves us; I'm glad I can show you that love!

Did that sound like an attractive way of evangelism? I wouldn't feel all that attracted either. That mode of communication was belittling, it cared not to know anything about who I am and how I recognize God at work in my life, and it focused upon getting my behind into the door and my name on the church rolls. We proclaim a message that God knows and cares for us deeply, and God wants to work with us always. Are we called to do less as God's people?

As we all remember, the message from last week was... "It's not about results." Indeed, evangelism is never about results. God's task is to grow; our task is to share, water, and let any seeds we plant to grow in their own time under God's nurturing. Today we have a new theme: it begins with friendship. Say it with me: "It begins with friendship." Very good. I believe we often have the unspoken belief that evangelism is a "drive-by" proposition. It may not be as extreme in my illustration, but it seems to declare that we aren't interested in people as people. We proclaim the Good News in persuasive fashion, try to change church memberships, and then move on to the next person. That's a gravely dangerous misperception. Evangelism is a much richer and deeper proposition that requires time, ongoing interest, and growth on everyone's part. We take just as much from the other as we give. Let us go into our discussion today recognizing that true evangelism "begins with friendship," as we tackle the misperceptions of the evangelism relationship in how people can be objectified and build something more constructive together in fostering new relationship in friendship.

I've noticed one of the hardest things for parents can be when to consider their children as adults as their children age. Many parents want to take care of their children so much, to avoid pain, to go the way that they know they should. It can feel difficult to let

their children figure out these lessons for themselves as they get older. It's a difficult process, but it leads many parents into the process of recognizing their children are adults and ready to make decisions for themselves. In a similar way, as Christians, we can have the difficulty of thinking that we have it all together and that we must share that with everyone we can. We can respect others as people or we can consider them as children for too long. We have good intentions in our hearts, but when we think about being on the other end of that, we realize that it can feel like we aren't being respected as persons. At the same time, people in general learn best not when they've been told something but when they live a lesson out. In the course of evangelism, we are called not to direct people who seem wayward and to bestow all the life and faith lessons they need. To many people, that feels belittling. We aren't treating people like people but as children to be shepherded, and if you've ever been in that position, I think you'd agree that it's really difficult. We need to let people hear the message for themselves. Sometimes it will grow sooner or later, but it is God who gives the growth. When we treat people like children in the evangelism relationship, we can objectify them, treating them as if they are unable to make decisions. There is no openness to receive the mystery of the Holy Spirit there.

Last week, we discussed the problems of televangelists and salespeople. Their sins, when we apply those ways of life to our work as evangelists, we see in focusing on results and objectifying people. How have you felt objectified, when no one cared for you as a person? I bet you can think of those drive-by evangelism sessions that ultimately do nothing but fulfill the speaker's esteem in thinking that he or she has preached the gospel. It can feel like we're being treated like children. Whenever I've gone to a professional game in Denver, like the Broncos or Rockies, there will be someone outside the stadium with a

loudspeaker and big sign telling everyone to repent and to come to Jesus Christ. If nothing else, they're just comical because one gets the impression that they don't really care about them. And with good reason. There is the overlaying impression that everyone's a sinner and God needs to be in his or her lives. There is no attempt at relationship or talking one-on-one. As we think about how we react, we recognize that we won't connect with that, even though they may have good intentions.

If I've learned anything about the Christian life, it is that we can't purely be about good intentions. Intention, no matter how well placed, can have disastrous consequences unless we make sure our actions are lined-up with the goodness of our intentions. This counts for the work of evangelism and beyond. The old phrase is "the road to hell is paved with good intentions," and history has proven this sentiment as fact. We can talk about the comical nature of the preachers outside of sports games, but it can get so much worse than that. In the name of evangelism, Christian missionaries have beat down and harmed people they considered inferior. Instead of loving all God declared good from the beginning, many evangelists lived a gospel of violence in seeking converts by any means necessary. Christians have had very bloody hands by the mentality of good intentions with bad actions. The Crusades in the Middle Ages had people who were seeking to follow God well went down to Jerusalem and started killing people randomly because they all thought that God was being wronged by their presence. They killed Muslims, Jews, and even other Christians without regard. We aren't in danger of this, but it always calls us into the reminder that when we are acting with good intentions but not seeing how they are translating into our actions, there is danger. The Gospel easily gets lost.

Now that we have tackled some of the misperceptions of the evangelism relationship, let's craft something much more fulfilling for us and for others. At Bible Study this past week, I asked a question to everyone there: What brought you to this church? This can easily show how well evangelism can work. Well, each person has their own reasoning about what he or she looks for in a church. It can be the messages, the pastor, the services, how they are cared for, the ministries of the church, and so on and so forth. I know you all come back for the preaching and the football commentary. But seriously, I want to submit to you that these will always be secondary factors. No one will stay or go based solely on these things or any other minor considerations. What invites people to the church most significantly are people they can relate to and that treat them well.

LuAnn told us the story of how she visited other churches when they moved to Cheyenne but there was little space for them to get plugged in. There was often a coldness to them; no one would go up and simply greet them. It's hard to feel the love of God in the midst of community when it does not show any welcoming spirit! When they came to Faith, it was a different vibe. They were greeted heartily, but it was never too much. Although she never used the word, it seemed to me that she was treated like a friend: not objectified, not asked to sign up for membership or to take over the PPR committee, not even asked what her church membership was. She and Duane decided to call this church home because they were treated like friends and "it begins with friendship."

So, what does friendship mean for evangelism? We don't live the drive-by technique, but we let the relationship grow over however amount of time it needs to grow. It's not on the clock. We open the door for trust and the ability to share some deep things. In evangelism, we do share some deep parts of ourselves, and that can mean so much more

to a receiver than a boxed message. It means we offer and let the other be independent people. It means we treat other as we want to be treated, with love and respect. A true friend never wants us to be a certain way or do exactly what we tell them to do, even if we have their best interests in heart. We have friends because we have something kindred with them, we relate to the world in a similar fashion. C.S. Lewis said in one of his works that friendship begins when your heart says, "Oh, you as well? I thought I was the only one!" True friends we love as they are, as evangelism should be. Our second scripture lesson for today is the greatest commandment of all. Jesus says it is "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and the second is like it: love your neighbor as yourself." He says there is no greater commandment than these. These are the heart of what we do, these are the mind of what we do, these are the soul of what we do; when our actions do not meet these criteria, we are not moving as Christians. When we treat others as friends, we evangelize, we preach the love of God in a more effective way than any of our words could ever express.

I can tell you a lot about evangelism, but I think it all needs to start with your own gut-check. Present your ideas to yourself. How would the message and vibe feel to you if you were on the receiving end? If it feels more like a solicitation than a discussion with a friend, you can know figure out that this message may take some refining. Indeed, we always want to be developing friends, as that is how God's love is truly shown.

So, to sum it all up, evangelism is first, what we learned last week: "It's not about results," and today, "It begins with friendship." And it does begin with friendship. We want to be treated like people who are people, not consumers, not objects. I believe that matches with our experiences in coming into church, and they should be the focus of how we share

the word of God. We leave it up to the other to hear our message and accept the heart of what we say. How we craft that message is what we will experience next time, in two weeks. In the meantime, let us remember when we share God's work, we recognize that it is not about results and that it begins with friendship. Thanks be to God! Amen and amen.