

Richmond Church of the Brethren Sermon Notes – 8/1/10
Katie Thompson

Scripture Text: John 4:1-42

Evangelism.

It's a scary word to most of us.

In fact, I think many of us believe that our community and our country have been hurt or even broken by evangelism gone awry.

Some of us may have personal stories of annoying or even hurtful evangelism efforts that we have encountered.

I remember the first "Progressive Christian Evangelist" I met in seminary.

I wondered, "Can those three words really go together?"

You see in my mind evangelists were the kind of folks that as a child I used to see on TV.

Breathing fire and brimstone, they told me if I did not accept Christ into my heart at this very instant, my little pre-pubescent soul would surely be condemned to the depths of hell.

In particular I remember one night that one of these evangelists had me so convinced of the punishment that awaits non-believers and the responsibility of us saved folk to bring our family and friends along lest we wish them eternal peril, that I rushed to find my little sister, who had been peacefully taking a bath up until the time I barged in on her.

I knelt beside the bathtub and pleaded with her to accept Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior, which she promptly did with wide and frightened eyes.

I wonder if anyone watching that scene would be surprised to learn that I am now training to go into pastoral ministry and my little sister is now an avowed atheist.

You see, as we grew older we both came to the conclusion that that kind of us vs. them, in group vs. out group, gold bricks in the sky vs. seven rings of fiery furnace, Christianity was not for either of us.

Yet, the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman in John reminds me an awful lot of those TV evangelists.

Though he does not speak of hell, Jesus seems to be using the same sort of guilt and logic that eventually leads this woman to her own sort of altar call.

He seems to call her out on her sins, her murky sexual past, and convinces her that it's his way or no way.

She is so convinced that she runs off and evangelizes to the whole town of Samaritans,

who are promptly converted

To be honest I can't get too excited about following a Jesus who belittles and tricks this woman from another faith into becoming his willing minion.

Furthermore, I don't think I'm alone in that.

Church of the Brethren folks, and especially Church of the Brethren folks of a progressive stripe, are not folks I think of as particularly impassioned evangelists.

Service? Yes we can do service. We'll send cows overseas and put soup in the hands of the local hungry.

Speak truth to power? We can do that. We'll protest our countries' wars and refuse to fight in them no matter the social cost.

Solidarity with the oppressed? Count on us. We'll wear our rainbow scarves at Annual Conference and stand in front of tanks in the West Bank.

Now, I'm **not** saying all of us will or are even called to do each of those things.

I'm **not** saying they are not important, courageous, Jesus-following actions.

I'm **not** saying that those actions and that witness are not in themselves evangelism tools, for they certainly are.

I **am** saying we are not usually the same stripe of people who you are most likely to find sitting in the local watering hole *evangelizing*.

In taking seriously our call to follow Jesus, our call to discipleship, we may feel called to give our time and money, to be social outcasts in our communities, and even, in extreme occasions, to risk our physical well-being, but talk to strangers about our faith?

We're not called to that are we?

Yet, that is precisely what Jesus does in this story.

Furthermore, that is precisely what Jesus calls his disciples to do.

After his disciples return from town they urge him to eat.

But, *in typical Jesus-style*, he waxes all mystical and mysterious on them saying, "I've got bread to eat that you all don't know about and my food is to do God's work."

The disciples, *in typical disciple-style*, don't get it at first.

So, Jesus gets even cooky-er and starts talking about "the fields" that are "ripe for harvesting."

Then, cooky-er yet he begins to turn his disciples into the strangest of farm hands, sending them to "reap where they did not sow."

The only thing more seemingly random than Jesus' dialogue with his disciples might be why John decides to wedge this little conversation into the Samaritan woman's story at all.

Biblical scholar Mary Tolbert likes to point out that The Gospel of John is full of these little "Meanwhile, back at the ranch," vignettes, and that *not* unlike the TV shows we hear that "Meanwhile back at the ranch" type segue on, what's happening in one part of the narrative often has a direct bearing on the larger narrative.

In that light, I think we can hear Jesus' harvesting dialogue with the disciples as a key to re-interpreting his evangelism efforts with this woman at the well.

As our recent focus on food and faith here at Richmond Church of the Brethren illustrated, many of us believe that our ethics and spirituality are important factors to consider when choosing what we eat.

Most of us have either started to consider or have long been carefully considering, what is in our food, where our food comes from, and how it is farmed.

We do not believe in any way that all food is bad, or that all farming is bad.

In fact, that's a kind of ridiculous and unsustainable idea.

Rather, we are concerned with *what* is cultivated and *how* it is cultivated.

We want to know that what is being harvested is making our bodies, our land, and our world better, or at least not worse.

I think that our ethics of evangelism and our ethic of farming or eating share some common factors.

Except that in a lot of our minds we have gone to the extreme of believing that evangelism can only be bad.

Just as humans have invented many different ways to farm and foods to farm, so we have invented many different ways to evangelize and things to evangelize for.

After a year of living in Berkeley, California and doing my best to come to peace with the term, I dismayed one of my atheist friends by donning her an environmental evangelist.

Her face said, "Eww, how could that term describe me?"

But I still believe that her way of faithfully carrying her own mug to her favorite coffee shop and proceeding to respectfully ask the employees and owner if they had ever considered the environmental and economical benefits of moving away from Styrofoam was spreading the good news of environmental justice.

My friend believed that good news was so important and so powerful that she was called to share it with others.

What is your good news?

What is so exciting and so vital to your being that you feel called to share it?

It has taken me awhile to come back to this conclusion, but at the heart of my good news, I can again honestly say, is the life and work of Jesus Christ.

It is the revealing witness to the in-breaking reign of God in our lives.

It is the challenging example of what it means to work for love of God and love of neighbor.

It is the promise of an incarnational salvation in this life and beyond from a God who joins us in our joys and in our suffering, a God who reaffirms our hope that love is stronger than hate and life is stronger than death.

I believe that the world in which we live needs to hear that good news and that hope.

In a world where the Gulf is churning with oil, our nation is entangled in imperial wars, our political discourse is hate-filled, and our economy has imploded so that now more than ever our Richmond community finds itself with fewer jobs for more people and formerly happy homes stand as vacant houses with their windows boarded up and their deeds in a bank file.

In this world the saving grace and good news of that in-breaking reign of God is desperately needed.

When I re-examine the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman in light of that good news I do find a positive model of planting and evangelism.

In John's Jesus I find a model of an evangelist who hangs out with people who it's not particularly popular to hang out with, like the Samaritan woman at the well.

I find a model of an evangelist who treats this same marginalized woman as an equal, and rather than trick her or stun her with logic, I believe he is hashing out theological issues by respectfully debating and arguing in good Jewish fashion.

In this story, I find a model of an evangelist who is not afraid and not judgmental when speaking the truth that he sees.

For when I read carefully it is clear to me that Jesus does not condemn this woman's sexual past in this story.

Rather, the remnants of patriarchy in me cause me to read in condemnation and to judge my own sister unfairly.

In this story I find a model of an evangelist who knows from where salvation comes, who knows who he is and speaks from that truth.

I find a model of an evangelist who knows that antiquated religious boundaries are for the transcending.

I find a model of an evangelist, who calls us to a long view of progress, to reap what our

forbears have sown and sow what those who come after us will reap, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together.

I believe that people in Richmond, the U.S. and the world are desperate for this good news.

In hearing this good news, maybe some will gain a new respect for us “crazy” Christians.

Maybe some will be reminded of the best parts of their own faith traditions.

Maybe some will find a new hope and a new way of living.

How will *you* share this good news in your actions and your words?