

When you hear the word evangelism, what comes to your mind?

(Billy Graham, Coercion, pressure, panic, fundamentalism, over my dead body)

Most of us, in a mainline United Methodist Church tend to think of evangelism in negative terms. We tend to think of it as something, I would never do. We tend to think of it as something I could never do.

As we begin our new sermon series, *Living Freely, Unbinding Your Heart*, I want to invite you to come with an open mind about this word, evangelism. I want to invite you to come with an open heart to maybe even learn a new perspective about what it means to "do evangelism."

When we talk about evangelism, one of the first things we have to face is the negative connotations around the word. And they are right in front of us.

Many of you know that I love to golf. But I have a rule now, when I golf with people that I don't know, I don't tell them what I do until I have golfed three holes with them.

You might look at me and say, "That is an odd rule. Why do you do that?" I am so glad you asked.

The main reason comes from a golfing experience I had early in ministry. I was in the middle of trying to write a sermon and I was having a hard time. I had writer's block. I decided to go golfing to get my mind off of work, just for a short time. Then I knew I would be able to come back and write away.

I went to one of my favorite courses. I was paired with two elderly men. They were both retired. One of them looked at me and said, "You clearly aren't retired, what do you do for a living?"

I said, "Well, I am a United Methodist pastor. I serve at Cargill United Methodist Church."

We teed off. As we were walking down the first fairway, he looked at me and said, "So, what do you think we need to do to be saved?" I was kind of surprised. This isn't normally a question I get while I am golfing, so I said, "Well, I believe that the first thing we need to do is recognize that we can't do life alone. Once we recognize that, then we need to invite God to be a part of our life."

That felt like a reasonable answer to me. What do you think?

Well, he heard my response and he said, "Nope. You're wrong. Unless someone says, 'I am forgiven by the blood of the lamb; they are not going to heaven.'"

I was shocked. I spent most of the rest of the next eight holes arguing with this fellow follower of Jesus Christ, over what it meant to be saved. I finally became so frustrated with him that I said, "Look, you are exactly what is wrong with the church. You really don't care to listen to anyone else. You have a nice, neat little formula and if people don't fit that formula, then there is something wrong with them. I am not going to talk to you anymore."

And I quit talking to him.

When we break evangelism down to nice neat formulas, we really miss what it is all about. When we package it so it becomes some type of a verbal karate chop that we can whack people with, we miss the boat. When we use it to manipulate people, we don't do justice to our faith.

Evangelism, at its heart, is simply sharing with someone I care about, what a difference living a life of faith means to me. Evangelism is faith sharing. It is caring enough about another person to actually get to know them, to live with them, to be authentic with them and to offer words and insights as to how our faith makes a difference for us.

In our scripture for today, Ananias is invited by God to do something pretty tough. He is invited to go pray for Saul.

Saul is the one who had been persecuting the church. He had been finding followers of Jesus Christ and putting pressure on them. When God's call came to Ananias, his first response was, "Oh God, keep looking for someone else please. I don't want to do this. This man is mean."

But God's response was, "Go! I have picked him to be my personal representative to outsiders, to leaders and well as insiders. Go. I will be with you."

So, Ananias goes to Saul, prays for him and baptizes him, and shares food and life with him.

Today, we remember Saul/Paul, much more so than we remember Ananias. But it took Ananias' willingness to be open to God, to share faith and prayer with Paul, to make a difference for Paul. Are you willing to be open to God? Are you willing to grow in faith yourself?

When I was in High School, I helped out one year at Vacation Bible School at the church I grew up in, First United Methodist Church in Bismarck, ND. During the 3rd day of VBS, I had a child come up to me and say, "I want to accept Jesus into my life. Will you help me?"

I looked at this little boy and panicked. I didn't know what to do? I said, "Just a minute." I ran and found one of the pastors of our church. I said, "This boy wants to accept Jesus. I don't know what to do? And do you really think he understands what he is doing?"

The pastor said, "Scott, just go and pray with him. Help him to invite Jesus to be his friend in his life."

I still wasn't sure what to do. I protested that the elementary age boy really wouldn't understand what he was doing. My pastor looked at me and said, "No, he might not really know what he is doing. But you have helped him to see God. And he wants to accept into his life, what he sees in your life. Just go pray. Help him become God's friend. That is what you are already doing."

That was when I started to realize that evangelism, is simply sharing ourselves, sharing our faith, with people around us.

Are you willing to grow in faith? Are you willing to share what you are learning with the people you care about?

May God help us grow in faith.

Amen