

Telling the Story: The E Word

Mark 16:9-20

Rev. Nancy S. Lynn

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Most any pastor can tell you that there are a few predictable responses when you tell someone what your job is. First, there is a moment of awkward silence while the person you're talking with takes in this unexpected information. Then, you can watch their facial expression shift from surprise to "uh, oh" to guilt, defensiveness, or, in the rare case, delight. Then, they might say something about the church they go to or the church they were raised in but don't go to anymore. Some will tell you about a family member who is clergy. But, without a doubt, ask any clergyperson you know, the most common thing people say is "Oh, my God, I just swore in front of you. I'm so sorry."

Now, I personally don't know any pastor who responds to that by saying, "Get thee behind me, Satan". In fact, most of us just kind of smile and laugh internally a little bit because there are so many other matters of the soul that we care about far more than whether or not you swear.

But, it just goes to show the power we assign to words. There are words we're not supposed to say. Some are considered crude or impolite. Others are truly offensive. And some we don't say because we aren't comfortable with them or what they mean. In mainline Protestant church talk, I think the most verboten word is the E-word - evangelism.

For many, many mainline Protestant Christians it is a word that causes our shoulders to tense, our stomachs to churn, our mouths to utter, "Oh, we don't do that here. We're not like that!" There are a lot of valid reasons for that. We have come to associate evangelism with the building of empires and the marriage of church and state. We think of times and places in which Christians arrived in another country determined to convert its citizens by any means - including under the threat of death. We think of fire and brimstone preaching or biblical tracts handed out on the street corner or the dreaded knock on the front door when a missionary arrives to convert us. Many of us remember the hypocrisy and dishonesty of some of the televangelists we grew up with - those who seemed more interested in pocketing people's donations than actually teaching the gospel. And perhaps most commonly, we think of "evangelicals" - those who make up a branch of Christianity which focuses on sin-based theology, conversion, and biblical inerrancy.

So, before we go any further, let's be really clear about the difference between "evangelism" and "evangelical". Both come from the same root, a Greek word which means "good news". Evangelism is just that - sharing the good news of God's love and the promise of new life that is the resurrection. On the other hand, an Evangelical is a person who adheres to a particular set of narrow beliefs which often leads them to judgmental and exclusionary practices.

Two weeks ago was Easter, and I preached on the resurrection story as Mark tells it. At the time, we talked about how abrupt and incomplete the ending seems, and I mentioned that early Christians were so uncomfortable with that ending that they wrote alternative endings to wrap up the story with the same themes found at the end of Matthew, Luke, and John.

There are at least three different endings that we know of that were tacked onto the end of Mark, but the one we usually find in our Bibles today is the one that we heard a few moments ago. This ending contains two critical pieces that are found in the other gospels - Jesus' post-resurrection appearances and what we commonly call The Great Commission, "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation."

That is what evangelism is. "Proclaim the good news to the whole creation". And what is the good news? Through Jesus' life and teachings, his death, and, most importantly, his resurrection, God shows us that God's love is stronger and more powerful than hate, than evil, than corruption, than even death. As people who choose to be disciples of Jesus, we are freed from all of the ways hate and evil and corruption have shaped our lives. Freed from the emotional baggage we carry from the past. Freed to live our fullest lives.

The last instruction Jesus gave his disciples, and therefore to us, is to proclaim that good news. We even say it in our membership vows, when we promise to support the church with our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. How you proclaim the good news will depend on you and what it means to you. Perhaps you have a story of how you have experienced God's love in action in your life. Are you able to put that experience into words? Is it a story you would consider sharing with someone else? Is it a story you would consider sharing in worship?

Another way in which you might proclaim the good news is through the example of how you live your life. How do you or might you live differently because you choose to live your life as Jesus did? What characteristics does Jesus have that you would like to foster in yourself? How do you show love and mercy to others? How does Jesus shape your priorities? Your witness to others about what it looks like to be a Christian is a profoundly powerful way of telling the story of faith.

Using the gifts God has given you is another way to proclaim the good news. For example, you might join the choir and sing the good news! Or you might create art that communicates what you believe. Maybe you would be interested in becoming a lay speaker or a lay servant - or perhaps you feel a call to ordained ministry. You might use your building skills through Habitat for Humanity or your cooking skills for Alpha House. You might put your heart for justice into advocating for those oppressed by systems and beliefs deeply embedded in our society.

Perhaps the easiest way to proclaim the good news is by telling other people about the good things happening at our church and inviting them to join us. Last week at the All-Church meeting, I was asked what we can learn from mega-churches about church growth. I didn't say it at the time, but I think the biggest lesson we can learn from megachurches is that growth happens when people who love their church invite others to come check it out. Mega-churches make a priority out of equipping their congregation members to bring people to church. No staff-driven program or slick marketing campaign is as powerful or successful as you can be by talking about why this place is meaningful to you to someone who might find it meaningful, as well.

Of course, that means giving it some thought. Why do you come here or why do you watch the livestream? Is it the community? The music? The children's program? The opportunities to do good? The adult faith formation classes? The welcoming statement? What gets you excited or moves you or inspires you? Can you put it into words? Can you even create a

little “elevator speech” so you are prepared when the opportunity comes up to share about our church?

Christianity has a bad reputation these days. Some of that is because of the mistakes of the past. A big part of it is because of Christian Nationalism and the growing movement to use Jesus and the Bible to support a very unChristian political agenda. Mistakes from the Church’s past largely came about through unhealthy power dynamics between Church and State. With Christian Nationalism, we are seeing those dynamics at work again.

Yet, we know that Jesus preached a gospel of love, acceptance, forgiveness, and inclusion. The exact opposite of what Evangelicals and Christian Nationalism represent. That is why it is so important for us to proclaim that gospel, to tell the story in our words and our actions.

Long before there were church buildings for people to come to, Christians went out into the world and shared who Jesus was and how his ministry and resurrection have changed the world. They lived in such a way that others wanted to be like them - caring for each other, helping people in need, sharing their resources.

With the movement of churches into buildings, this began to change. Over the last couple of decades, there has been a lot of talk about the difference between attractional churches and missional churches. I believe the fundamental difference hangs on this great commission from Jesus. Attractional churches have been the model in the U.S. for the last 200 years or so. They are churches that create great programs and wait for people to come to them. Missional churches prepare God’s people to go out and be the hands and feet of Christ in the world. Church is not about consuming but about learning and doing and sharing.

Over the next several weeks, we are going to be exploring what it looks like to be Easter people - people who tell the story of Easter just as Jesus asked us to do. I would call this a worship series rather than a sermon series. Some weeks one of us will be preaching, but other weeks we’ll hear the story as our youth tell it, we’ll hear the story in music, we’ll welcome our confirmands as they prepare to tell the story each in their unique way, and we’ll celebrate the outreach and connection ministries of our church and how they carry the message into the world.

During this series, I invite all of you to spend some time asking yourself “What am I doing to further God’s kin-dom? What can I do to tell the story of God’s divine love?” May it be so.

Amen.