

Home Field Disadvantage

Luke 4:21-30

January 28, 2007

I.

On several occasions you have heard me speak of mission and outreach, and our responsibility to take the church into the community. Today, however, I'm going to speak about the other side of that coin, which is our responsibility to bring the community into the church.

Why is it important to reach out both ways? Why do we send ourselves out into the world, and at the same time invite the world to come in here? Wouldn't it just be a lot easier to do our own thing, to have church on Sunday, to have our own social events, and to just be concerned about each other?

Well, there is a lot to be said for doing those things. Certainly we are a community of faith, and it's only natural to want our community to meet our needs and to be there for us. But we all know that we are much more than just a club or a social group. We understand our Christian obligations as the Body of Christ in the community.

As I said just a minute ago, there are two sides to the coin. One side is mission and outreach, and in many ways we have been doing that. St. Thomas has a strong history of helping others, and in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina we responded in many ways to peoples' needs.

Now, as our recovery from Katrina is beginning to get some traction, we are called to look more closely at the other side of the coin. Some people call that side evangelism. Others, who recall the enthusiastic excesses of TV preachers and door-to-door missionaries, might use different terminology. But we're all talking about the same thing. No matter what words we use we are describing our sacred responsibility to bring people into the church.

For some people, it means bringing them to Christ for the first time. For others, it means bringing them back into a church they once knew but have left behind. And for still others, it means extending ourselves to people who are searching but are not sure how to look

We understand what it means to be evangelists in the best sense of the word. And we know that it is not easy. Today's reading clearly makes that point. Look what happened when Jesus spoke to his neighbors, to people who knew him.

II.

The Reading from Luke describes Jesus' return to Nazareth where he grew up. Jesus, the home town boy who had made a name for himself, was coming home. He had put tiny Nazareth on the map, was besieged by crowds wherever he went in Galilee, and was coming back to his roots.

Don't you think the people would have welcomed him? Shouldn't they have put up banners and held a parade? This was the man who could have transformed Nazareth into a religious center unrivaled in the region. Pilgrims would have come from all over to see where Jesus grew up. Why did the people reject him?

The short answer is they wanted a miracle worker and instead got a prophet. Jesus' notoriety up to this early point in his ministry grew primarily from his miracles and healings. He did not begin his prophetic work in earnest until this visit to Nazareth we heard about today when he told the people that he was the fulfillment of Scripture. They, however, wanted something else.

The reading tells us that the people of Nazareth wanted Jesus to do the same miracles and healings he had done in Capernaum. Jesus, however, cast himself in a prophetic role, and lamented that he could not be accepted in his own home town. He talked about how two Old Testament prophets, Elijah and Elisha, were rejected by the Jews and so they went out and healed Gentiles instead.

This is what infuriated the people who were listening. They had an "us" and "them" mentality. They all thought that Jesus belonged to "us" and would take care of "us," the Jews, and instead Jesus spoke about reaching out to "them," the Gentiles, the pagans, the unbelievers

The reading says that "when they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage." They thought Jesus was not respecting his origins. The unspoken words from the people of Nazareth were, "who does he think he is? He's just a carpenter's son. He's got a lot of nerve coming back here and talking to 'us' like that. After all, we know the truth and we're not like 'them'."

This story illustrates some of the problems Jesus faced throughout his entire ministry. While he certainly had disciples and followers, he also threatened the established order. Jesus regularly went into situations where the people were divided up into "us" and "them," but his message was addressed to "you all." This meant that he said things that some people did not want to hear, and those things eventually led to the cross.

III.

What does this story mean today? Well, certainly we will not be threatened with persecution for what we say, but some of us might feel hesitant to talk about our faith outside of our own comfort zone.

It's easy when we are with "us" here in the church because "we" know that "we" share a common understanding of faith and doctrine, and a common worship experience. But as soon as "we" think about talking to "them" out there in the community, people who are not members of the church, then "we" might become a little hesitant because "they" are not "us."

This can be especially true with people we know. Let's face it. Sometimes it's easier to talk about God with complete strangers than with friends, family, and co-workers. Again, it is the same "us" and "them" situation that Jesus faced in Nazareth.

And while "they" are part of "us" for purposes of our social groupings and personal interactions, there can be a tendency for "them" to remain as "them" in the context of faith, God, and the church.

We might think we have the same home field disadvantage as Jesus did in Nazareth, and thus we avoid discussing religion. We might feel that we just don't know what to say. Or we might be concerned about not being able to answer a difficult question. Or we might be worried about invading someone's privacy.

I recall reading about a survey that was given to people who were attending a training session for a Billy Graham crusade. The question was, "what is the hardest part of speaking about your faith to others?" A few responded that they simply did not feel called to do so, or that they wanted to get their own lives in order first. However, the overwhelming majority expressed a fear that the other person would react in a negative way.

So, if any of you might feel that way, you are not alone. What can we do about it? I can stand here and tell you not to worry about it, you'll be OK. I can tell you that you don't need to be a theological expert, or that you don't have to have answers to complex religious

questions. I can tell you that your friends and neighbors still will be your friends and neighbors whether or not you talk to them about faith, or church, or God.

But if I was coaching people on effective evangelism, I would start with three fundamental and basic principles, that should guide whatever they do.

First, and perhaps most importantly, we should remember that people are not saved by being told what's wrong with them, but rather what's right with God. And people are not brought into the church by being told that their lives are incomplete without it, but rather how much more fulfilling their lives could be with it.

Second, we cannot say that our faith is an insurance policy against difficulties in life, or that the Gospel promise turns away all problems. Being a Christian does not automatically resolve the hardships of life. We experience victory not because of the absence of problems, but because of the presence of faith.

And third, never underestimate the Holy Spirit. Time and time again I have seen or heard about situations where people just stepped out in faith and talked to someone else about Christ, or the church, or their faith, and it made a difference. The age of miracles is far from over. The power of Christ can be made real through the Spirit, who always is with us.

IV.

So I would say to you, it's OK to talk to people about the church, or your faith, or what God has done for you, or how Jesus fits into your life, or whatever else you think fits the situation. You don't have to beat people over the head with the Bible, and you are not required to lead off by talking about complex doctrines like salvation and eternal life.

Now, don't get me wrong here. I'm not diminishing Christ's work on the cross and his resurrection as our eternal hope. But I think many people are more likely to start a journey of faith by first hearing the good news of Christ in this world as a foundation for understanding the good news in the next world. I'm merely suggesting that effective evangelism can begin with life in the here and now rather than life in the hereafter, although both are essential.

An example of this, perhaps a controversial example, is on television every week. Have you seen the programs produced by Joel Osteen and his Lakewood Church in Houston? Some people criticize him as promoting only "feel good" religion. I say that if we didn't have a Joel Osteen we would have to invent one.

Joel Osteen preaches for thirty minutes about all the wonderful things that God in Christ can do for us today. He tells his viewers how they can be transformed in faith and live a victorious life right now. And at the end of the program he urges his viewers to find a good Bible church if they already have not done so, and to begin their walk with Christ.

In some ways Joel Osteen's critics are right. It is "feel good religion." But that's OK with me because it's offered as a point of entry into the faith, not as a discipline to sustain faith over the years. In that context I believe it can be an effective approach. People who are brought to faith through Joel Osteen's uplifting message are in a position to move on to a more mature faith as they deepen their spiritual experiences.

The same thing applies to us as we think about evangelism. Put your best foot forward. Tell people what God has done in your life. Explain how with Christ you have been more fulfilled. Tell them about St. Thomas and the welcoming and loving community we have here. Give them a reason to walk in the door, and we will let the Holy Spirit lead us in the next steps.

V.

We have a ministry to the community here at St. Thomas. But it is not just to those in need, the sick, and the poor, and those without the basics of life. It also is a ministry to those who are not here. It is a ministry to our friends, our next door neighbors, our golfing buddies and bridge club members, and to people we know who have not yet come to faith in Christ, or whose faith might temporarily have been sidetracked.

We are called to reach out to them, and the Holy Spirit will help us. Sometimes this means reaching beyond what we think is our comfort zone. But that comfort zone might be drawn too small because we think we have to do too much.

It really isn't that hard. After all, they are our friends. They are people we know. Tell them the good things the church and your faith have done for you. You might be surprised to find that they are searching for something more in their lives, and that you can help them take that first small step toward a new life in Christ. *Amen.*