

Second Sunday after the Epiphany

January 19, 2014

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown, MD

Readings: Isaiah 49: 1-7; Psalm 40: 1-11; 1 Corinthians 1: 1-9; John 1: 29-42

Grace to you and peace from God — Father, Son, Holy Spirit.

One beautiful fall day in Athens, Georgia, Pastor Pam Driesell was marching along with the happy upbeat throng of people pouring into that other cathedral of public worship, a football stadium. Specifically Sanford Stadium for a University of Georgia Bulldogs game. Right outside the gate they came upon an “evangelist.” He was large and holding up signs about the eternal damnation of drunkards, while shouting out Bible verses about the doom of all kinds of people.

That was when one of those eternally doomed drunkards confronted the “evangelist.” “Let me get this straight,” he slurred as he invaded the man’s personal space. “I’m going to hell because I’ve had too many beers??? Well...what about all the Big Macs and fries you’ve been eating, big boy?” He asked as he poked at the man’s big belly and smugly laughed. “Seriously, BIG BOY, what about GLUTTONS?”

The “evangelist” stuck to his script proclaiming all drunkards hell bound. He did not make eye contact or react to the intoxicated man who finally got right up in his face. “Maybe I’ll see you there,” the drunkard said, poking him now in the chest and laughing a sinister laugh.

“But,” Pastor Driesell said, “it wasn’t funny. It was intense. It was sad. It was disturbing. Two people treating each other with contempt, hurling Bible verses like verbal grenades at each other.” The group she with kept moving. Trying to ease the tension, one of her Jewish friends looked at her and laughed, “You see why I’m not Christian.” Embarrassed and sad, the best she could come up with was, “I think they forgot to read the part about love one another and judge not that you should not be judged.”¹

If I began a sermon in most mainline congregations by asking, "Who grew up dreaming about being an evangelist? Or "Who wants to be an evangelist?" I would likely get few if any hands raised and a lot of squirming people. Not because we don't believe Jesus has good news the world needs to hear but because most of us would conjure up an evangelist like the one in Pastor's Driesell's story or like Lucy in one Peanuts cartoon.

Lucy says to Charlie Brown, "I should have been a great evangelist." Charlie Brown says, "Why do you say that?" Lucy responds, "I persuaded the boy ahead of me in school that my religion was better than his religion!" Charlie Brown says, "Oh, and how did you do that?" Lucy explains, "I hit him over the head with my lunch box."

We're quite sure that isn't the way Jesus would have us spread the gospel. We want no part of that kind of evangelism but we hesitate to take the next step. The next step is asking the compelling question, "Well, how **are** we to spread the good news of the saving grace and love of God?" Which then will move us to the even more unsettling question, "How am **I** to be the kind of evangelist Jesus wants his followers to be?" Evangelism *is* part of this disciple life we've chosen. Being nice, speaking kindly and doing good things are essential, particularly if we want others to take our evangelism seriously. But we are also called to actively spread the good news so that others will come to know and love Jesus, too. Every child of God is called to be an evangelist and to be honest, it scares the willies out of most of us. Maybe because we've had mostly poor models. Maybe because we think faith is such an intensely private concern. Maybe because we don't want to show disrespect to those who think differently than we do. Whatever truth those reasons may hold, it still doesn't erase that we are each called to be part of the "God Squad," part of the Lord's saving efforts to transform the world into the kingdom of God, where all people know acceptance, have enough and live in peace. We are all to be evangelists. How do we jump over our fears and images of religious bullies to fulfill this calling of our discipleship?

St. John has a tip or two to offer in today's gospel. In John's gospel we don't see Jesus being baptized, we *hear* about it. John the Baptist points to Jesus and testifies to what he saw — "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove and it remained on him"... this is the Son of God... this is the Lamb of God." John shares what he has experienced and what he has learned from his own relationship with God. Again the next day, John points Jesus out to several of his own followers. "Here is the Lamb of God." No bullying. No exaggerated promises or threats. John simply points out Jesus and what he has come to mean to him. Those disciples then go seek out Jesus, not fully understanding what it is they are seeking. Jesus says, "Come and see," "Come spend time with me and see." They do. Based on his own experience, Andrew goes looking for his brother, Simon, and asks him to come and see Jesus. There's our model. No long theological explanations. No beating someone to submission with Bible quotes. No exaggerated expectations or threats. Simply, here is what I found in Jesus. Come with me see what you experience.

Sound too simple? Think about how it works in other parts of your life. How many of us have read a book, gone to a movie, listened to certain music after someone told us about it and how much they enjoyed it? A new restaurant can have good food and service and decent ambiance but after that it needs customers. It needs diners, lots of repeat diners. Lots of repeat diners who bring friends or family when they return and those new diners, in turn, bring others. We may not think of recommendations like these to be testimony but that's exactly what they are. "I read this book and couldn't put it down." "I saw that movie and was riveted." "I couldn't believe how good the food was at this restaurant." After the testimony is the invitation, "I'll lend you the book if you'd like... I'd go again to see the movie if you'd like to go... Next time we eat out we have to go to this restaurant." Yep, it's everyday testifying about our experiences with others so they might have that enlivening experience, too.

So the next time your excited about something going on here at Haven, share it with someone else. It might be a concert. It might be a Ladies Night Out. It might be helping up at SERRV Fair Trade center in New Windsor or a Lenten devotional booklet. It may be bringing children or other helpers to Vacation Bible School. Simply share your excitement for what you're doing and ask if they'd like to come along. For folks with no church experience or unhappy experiences, worship may not be the best way for them to first experience the presence of God. In those instances asking people to come experience the community or the meaningful work of God's people may be more inviting. That's what we learn from John the Baptist and Anderew in today's gospel. Speak truth from our experience and say, "come and see" for yourself.

When living in the south, Pastor Catherine Taylor and her family liked to go to the Gulf in Alabama for vacations. One year they saw a scissor-tailed flycatcher. It's a rare visitor from South American with pale yellow-green feathers and a very, very long, narrow V-shaped tail – like a pair of scissors lying open on a table. It was resting in the long grass by a state park road looking exoctic and tired. They knew it had come across the Gulf, and this was perhaps the only chance they'd ever have to see it. All morning they took turns going back to see the flycatcher. But an important part of the story is they didn't spot the flycatcher by themselves. Someone told them it was there. Others had spotted the flycatcher and told them exactly where along the road it was resting. If those others hadn't shared their experience and excitement, there's a chance they might have missed it.²

Keep your eyes open. There are people who might miss the chance to know the love of God, the acceptance of Jesus, the grace and meaningful mission of a God-centered community. They don't want pious sayings or exaggerated promises. They want to see lives that reflect the compassion, integrity and care for others that is life-giving and healing to the world. Only then might they be open to your invitation to a

church-related event, worship, activity, service opportunity where you, yourself have sensed the love and presence of God. No lunch box over the head. No signs threatening damnation. Just hospitably opening a door, recommending a good place, and offering to go with them.

Linda M Alessandri 1/18/14

ENDNOTES

1.Rev. Pam Driesell, "Who Wants to Be an Evangelist?" posted on www.Day1.org for January 19, 2014

2.Rev. Catherine Taylor, "What Are You Looking for" posted on www.Day1.org for January 20, 2008