

May 18, 2008

Trinity Sunday, Year A (2 Corinthians 13:11-13; Matthew 28:16-20)

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga.

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“Go, make disciples, baptize them in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey what I have commanded,” says Jesus at the end of *Matthew*. This is the Great Commission given to the first disciples in the resurrection and so to every disciple that follows. It is a call and commission to evangelism or to proclaiming the good news of God, inviting discipleship and baptism and obedience to the commandments of Jesus as the way of life.

‘Evangelism’ is a word and idea that many of us would rather avoid. For some, it evokes memories of being manipulated by narrow minded people. And for others, memories of being berated from pulpits of long ago as well-meaning pastors tried to ensure that we had been ‘saved’. We promise that we will proclaim the good news in word and deed and we have tended to prefer the ‘deed’ part and avoid talking too much about our faith. Maybe this avoidance was not terribly critical in a society in which most people had some idea of what Christianity was all about and we could get on with proclaiming good news in deed by serving the poor and working for justice. The world in which we find ourselves is changing fast, however, and there are growing numbers of people whom we are increasingly likely to meet who have no background and little or no interest in knowing anything about what we believe, what we stand for or what we are about. (Tonight we have one of our occasional ‘café nights’, designed to be a relaxed time for us to get together and to invite our neighbors to be with us, a gift to our neighbors and perhaps also something that sparks interest in knowing who we are and what we are up to. Soon our vestry will be discussing a report about how we connect with our immediate neighbors in residences and offices so that they have some idea of what we are up to on this corner.) Paying attention to our proclamation of good news in an environment that is changing at a rapid pace is something we simply have to do.

Lest this attention to evangelism becomes just one more ‘ought’ in our lives, something with all the appeal of one of those diagnostic medical procedures we are all supposed to have from time to time, or another ethical piety, --something that is meant to be good for us, but that we do not really want to do, let me say something about what evangelism is not and something about what it is and can be for us.

On Trinity Sunday, the only Sunday of the year that is named for a doctrine, it is worth emphasizing that evangelism is not about getting other people to give intellectual assent to a series of propositions about God. Evangelism is not persuading people about particular doctrines by which those who have gone before us have tried to articulate the faith in a reasonable way. It may be useful to have a conversation about what exactly happened in the resurrection, but that is not the point. The point is to invite others to share in what we know to be life-transforming and life-giving grace in Christ as part of the body of Christ, those people of God who have chosen to follow Jesus as Lord.

I'm reading a fascinating book at the moment about why we do and keep on doing things that don't make any rational sense. It is a book that answers in part Paul's question about why he keeps on doing the things that he doesn't want to do.[1] It is called *Predictably Irrational* and is by a professor of behavioral economics at MIT called Dan Ariely about the hidden forces that shape our decisions.[2] One section is about the influence of arousal on our decisions and our thinking. He makes clear that when we are aroused or angry or tired or depressed or any other emotional state, our decisions are going to be measurably different from those times when we are calm. For me, it is a signal that there is something going on that is unhelpful when we are talking to someone who is getting bent out of shape, all emotional, angry or ugly about doctrine. "You must believe as I do if you want to be saved" is the kind of stance that is a clue that we are not dealing with good news but with something else, maybe power or control. That is not evangelism and is something we need to watch out for in ourselves.

Evangelism is much more an invitation to follow Jesus as Lord, to become a disciple in a community of disciples who are together being taught obedience to the law of Love. Evangelism is an invitation to join a community of people who tell the story of Jesus and who share stories of the transforming grace of God. As one theologian called Bryan Stone puts it, "all Christian evangelism *calls* for conversion that is nothing less than a complete 'turning around' (*metanoia*)." [3] In the end, evangelism is not something that any of us do individually, but as part of a community who can point to and show in our own lives what it means to live knowing that we are valued because we are made by love for love rather than valued only because of our capacity to consume. We all benefit when any of us tells a story of what is going on in our lives that show us a pilgrim people traveling lightly with God, fluid, ever in formation, ever touched by the grace of God.

I was talking to a member of one of our GIFT groups the other day about how this group of nine or ten people was in no way a natural social group, but who were learning to share their lives with one another in ways that helped him recognize and appreciate the grace of God in his own life. He talked of how this unlikely group of people had begun to care for each other in real and effective ways as one or another of the group faced significant challenges in their lives. He called this experience a 'God thing' as he could not imagine such grace otherwise. This is what every one of us can practice as we take seriously the Great Commission of Jesus to his disciples: being able to name and share what it is that God is up to on our lives, where we are experiencing conversion and how that is liberating us.

On Trinity Sunday we remember that it is of the nature of God to be in relation, how that relation is revealed as Love and how that Love brings infinite possibilities, galaxies and universes into being. Even so, we may expect a multitude of ways in which we are liberated through repentance and forgiveness of sin, through knowing healing and wholeness and finding our way into greater integrity in our lives, through learning that it is in giving that we receive and in service we are freed and even in dying in certain ways that we discover real and fulfilling life. All we have to do is practice sharing these stories with each other, itself a gift and an act of grace and we are well on our way to fulfilling the Great Commission.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

[1] Romans 7:14-25

[2] Harper, 2008

[3] Bryan Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom* (Brazos, 2007) p.257