

April 21st: Proclaim

As many of you know, this Fall we returned to the Narrative Lectionary—a year long collection of readings that take us from the origins of God’s people to the first century world. These readings are chosen on purpose, because they help us trace a particular theme throughout our scripture texts—and this year our theme is “Love in Action.” In each of these passages, there’s a compelling action that is embedded into the narrative, that I want us to be paying attention to and practicing this week. Of course, we know that love is the most important verb of all, so we’ll also be tracing how God’s love was shown to our spiritual ancestors and discover how God’s love is still being shown to us today.

As we study together, I want to remind us that the goal isn’t simply to increase our knowledge of God—the goal is to increase in love towards God and towards each other. The goal is to increase our love in action, this week and every week, so that our world can more and reflect God’s enduring love for all of creation.

Let’s take a moment to pray before we begin.

God of Hope, we come to this sacred space this morning seeking your good news for our lives. We come to hear that you love us, and that you are opening your arms to us, so we prepare our hearts to hear from your holy text, and we prepare our souls to listen for the message that you have for us. We ready ourselves for the wisdom that you will share with us, and the call that you will place on us as your disciples. Speak to us now through this story, and through the meditations of our hearts. Amen.

Many of you might remember that I grew up evangelical—I’ve talked about this before, but I haven’t really gone into detail about how this experience shaped me as a person and as a pastor. Evangelicalism has several different forms, and several different factions, but they are united by this common sense of mission—a particular zeal that I can see more clearly now that I’ve departed from that culture and serve in a different setting.

The word “evangelical” comes from the Greek word *euangelion*, meaning “good news.” And a lot of evangelical Christianity is centered around the importance of sharing the good news of Jesus—through methods that are often called “evangelism.” In my home church back in New England, a lot of our time and effort was focused on these acts of evangelism—we weren’t going door to door like other religious groups you might have heard about, but there was a lot of emphasis on sharing our faith—at work, at school, with friends, with strangers, and anyone else who we considered to be in need of salvation. It was something we were supposed to be doing all the time. At any moment. In all situations.

I can remember youth group conversations about how to talk about God with our classmates, and lessons on how to invite people to church on Sunday mornings, and going to conferences where leaders told teenagers to burn rock CDs and other so called “immoral” media, because that would show other people how serious we were about our faith. Evangelicalism in the 90s and early 2000s was a wild time, to put it mildly.

But in all my time in the evangelical church, I don’t think I heard a single sermon or a single bible study lesson on the passage that we heard just a few moments ago. Which is kinda strange, right? This passage is a perfect example of how ancient Christians attempted to evangelize to non-believers, so why didn’t we talk about it more? Well, spoiler alert, I think it’s because this particular episode of evangelism ends with a riot and death threats, and most evangelicals would consider that not so uplifting on a Sunday morning. Evangelism is supposed to be fun and exciting and result in lots and lots of conversions, and unfortunately this story with its angry mobs and jail time might run a little counter to those expectations.

But before we get into that conflict and how it happened, let’s take a look at the backdrop of today’s story.

This morning we find ourselves in the world of the early church—our passage takes us to a period of time after Jesus’ death and resurrection, but before the church became the institution that we know today. In these early days of

Christianity, the disciples shifted from being students to being teachers, and they began to travel throughout the Middle East sharing the message of Jesus.

In this passage from the Book of Acts, the apostle Paul is traveling through a northern region of modern day Greece, when he stops in a city called Thessalonica. If this city name sounds familiar, it might be because Paul eventually writes multiple letters to the congregation that forms here, letters we now find in our Bible and call 1 and 2 Thessalonians. But that's quite a few years in the future, and this first visit to Thessalonica is not without significant conflict.

Our passage begins with this background information: "When Paul and his companions had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. 'This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah,' he said."

A gentle reminder might be necessary here: Paul and his traveling companions, despite their conviction to follow Jesus, were not in the business of rejecting their Jewish identity and heritage. They were still Jews, participating in Jewish culture and life, including worship in the local synagogue. They were still part of the Jewish community, and enjoyed socializing with other Jews in the normal, expected ways. Even in a Greek city, this was a significant part of their plan to share the Gospel of Jesus. Even far from their homeland, their Jewish identity is the social glue that they use to communicate with others about this new way of following God.

But as we heard, this message proclaimed in the synagogue causes quite a stir—the mob begins to form. Unfortunately, the situation escalates even further. We hear, "They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials, shouting: 'These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's

decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.” When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go.”

So from these verses, we’re supposed to understand that this message of Jesus seems to be disrupting some kind of social order or spiritual dynamic. It’s countercultural—both to the Jewish culture of the time, and the culture of the greater Roman Empire. Because of this conflict, Paul’s mission of teaching and healing is cut short, and they are thrown out of town. Even though they hold this common identity, this kind of ministry isn’t ready to be received by the Jews of Thessalonica. This kind of communication isn’t what this community is able to hear. At least not yet.

However, this isn’t the end of the Christian story—Paul goes on to share news about Jesus in other cities and towns, and eventually the movement of Jesus followers grows to hundreds, then thousands, then millions of people. Paul writes letters, preaches sermons, shares stories, disciples individuals, and proclaims the gospel of liberation and new life to people in desperate need of hope. And that message becomes so compelling, that no conflict could stop it. It becomes so contagious, that no singular place can contain it. It becomes so convincing, that no people or demographic group can lay exclusive claim to it.

The growth of the church into a global movement is a miracle of the Holy Spirit, but some of us might be noticing that this movement looks quite different in our modern world. In fact, we might be seeing that in our current communities, the institutional church is actually not growing much at all, and certain groups have been in a state of decline for some time now.

But how did this shift happen?

Well my friends, I hate to admit it, but I think the modern church has a little bit of a communication problem. And by that, I mean that collectively, we’ve gotten a little bit of a bad reputation. I don’t mean just the evangelicals, or the fundamentalists, or the Westboro Baptists, or the fringe sects—I mean all of us. Even though some denominations and some groups are different from others, it’s just a fact that as a whole, we’ve become known for some not so good

things. Whether it's right or it's wrong, we've gotten lumped together, and because of our common name, we're seen as the same.

Because of this communication problem, I think we need to think carefully and critically about two very important things: one, our message, and two, our methods. If the global church and individual congregations are interested in surviving to see another generation, I think we might need to consider that what we are sharing with the world and how we are sharing it are not the most effective means of communicating God's good news. And if we're serious about desiring to grow again as a movement of faith, we need to understand that if our message and our methods aren't right, it makes total sense that more and more people are actively opposed to or indifferent towards what we have to offer.

First we might need to ask ourselves, are we truly proclaiming the message of liberation and new life that has been entrusted to us? When we share about the gospel, is our message actually bringing hope and healing to the people that we meet? Is it good news for the poor? Is it good news for the sick? Is it good news for those in addiction? Is it good news for the incarcerated? Is it good news for the oppressed? Is it good news for the hungry? Is it good news for those who suffer in body, mind, or spirit?

If we answer "no" to any of those questions, we need to rethink our message.

Secondly, we might need to question, is the way that we're communicating connecting with our intended audience? Are our attempts at outreach and ministry being received by the people we are hoping to reach? Are they able to hear us and are they able to listen to the message we're sharing? Are we welcoming new friends into our community on a regular basis because of our efforts?

Basically, we need to ask ourselves: are our methods working?

And if we answer "no" to any of these questions, we need to ask ourselves why this might be the case. Because even if our message is good news, we still need

to make sure that it is understood. Even if we're saying the right things, we still need to speak in ways that people will actually hear.

Communication without any sense of comprehension is just noise. And our culture doesn't need any more noise, does it? It's already too chaotic and too loud. And speaking of noise, I've got an example for you.

When my Dad was in Seattle this past Fall, we went to a Mariners game—my first Mariners game at T-Mobile Park. We got there a little early, and as we joined a crowd of people waiting for the gates to open, we noticed that there was a man standing on the street corner with a megaphone and a speaker. And as this crowd grew larger and larger, the man began to yell into the megaphone, and even over the increasing sounds of chatter and shuffle, we began to hear what he was saying. It turns out that he was a street preacher—and his message that day was pretty similar in tone and content to the puritan pastor Jonathan Edwards' famous sermon "Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God."

After just a few minutes of hellfire and brimstone, it was clear that this man was on a mission to spew as much condemnation and judgment as possible. He had a big sign that listed all the kinds of people that God apparently hates, and his message was all about fear—fear that we aren't good enough, fear that God doesn't love us, fear that our supposed unworthiness will eventually result in eternal separation from the divine. Fear reverberated through that street, hatred settled on every inch of that sidewalk.

What was also clear was that no one was listening. I mean, he was as loud as could be, and no one was hearing him. He was shouting, yelling at people directly, trying desperately to get their attention, but no one wanted to engage with him. In a weird way, I'm glad no one was actually taking in his words, but I think this public act of evangelism did some real damage to the work that the collective church is trying to accomplish. Both his message and his methods did a real disservice to the churches that are trying to bring hope and healing and peace and liberation to our broken world.

But what about us—what about people who want to share good news in a way that doesn't harm others, or shame them, or demand they destroy all of their CDs? What about our congregation, who wants to share a faith that includes things like justice for the oppressed, and female pastors, and a love for queer people?

How do we proclaim that good news in a way that people can hear?

Well, I have great news. In the midst of all the noise that is out there—I still think there's a need for the message that we have to offer.

I think our neighbors need to hear that God loves them, just as they are. I think our friends need to hear that there's no mistake or misdeed that can separate us from God's mercy and forgiveness. I think our family members need to hear that in a world of destruction and despair, God is making all things new, right here and right now. I think our classmates need to hear that the world is better with them in it, no matter what other people might say or what lies they might believe about themselves. I think our nation needs to hear that guns and bombs will never bring us the peace that we are searching for. I think our world needs to hear that constant consumerism won't fill the void inside of us.

Due to our history, our world might expect Christians to proclaim a message like the one the street preachers shared outside of T-Mobile Park, and they might expect Christians to use methods that shame or belittle or bully anyone who falls outside of our cultural norms, but I think we can be countercultural just like Paul and his traveling companions.

If our world expects to hear judgment, let's proclaim liberation.

If our world expects to hear condemnation, let's proclaim forgiveness.

If our world expects to hear exclusion, let's proclaim sacred community.

If our world expects to hear division, let's proclaim wholeness.

If our world expects to hear fear, let's proclaim hope.

If our world expects to hear hatred, let's proclaim love.

And let's proclaim it all in a way that honors our neighbors and the dignity that they deserve. Let's proclaim good news in a way that reaches out to heal, instead of to wound. In our words and actions, let's be evangelists of a community that builds each other up instead of tearing each other down. Let's proclaim our message in a way that sees the inherent goodness and image of God in every single person in this world. Let's share our faith in a way that welcomes our fellow humans into curiosity and exploration of mystery, rather than cliché but unsatisfying answers or a need to be certain.

I can't guarantee that we'll never encounter the kind of conflict that Paul and his traveling companions did in Thessalonica, and I can't guarantee that we'll avoid difficult situations or our complicated culture, but Paul persevered, and so will we. God's message lived on, and now it lives on in and through us. The story that began long ago and has endured for centuries is now ours to proclaim. So my friends, today and everyday, may our message and our methods always be good.

Amen.