

5 Epiphany B
Being the News that Is Good

February 4, 2024
Mark 1:29-39; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23

One of the best illustrations I've read, and use often, about evangelism is: "You don't throw a drowning person a sandwich. However good the sandwich may be, it just doesn't meet that person's need."¹

With the preschoolers I offered them an elephant to take home. They didn't think that was good news. I also, like with the children, offered a good cookie, at a time when they really needed something else.

For the news we share to be good, it has to meet a need of the other person. Some examples from the man who wrote the sandwich quote:

... if a woman is dying of cancer, the gospel of God's strong word of resurrection. If a person is permeated with guilt, the gospel is God's assurance of forgiveness. If people experience extreme suffering, the gospel is the prayer: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble." For the starving, the gospel may be bread. For a homeless refugee, the gospel may be freedom in a new homeland. For others, the gospel may be freedom from political tyranny. The gospel is always related to human need. ... The gospel is God's truth, God's message, God's action, God's word to a particular person, to a particular need, to a particular historical situation.²

The word "gospel" comes from a Greek word that means "good news". We get the English words "evangelical" and "evangelism" from this group of Greek words. In much of Europe, Lutherans are known as "evangelicals," because we emphasize the gospel – God's good news – God's actions for us. This should not be confused with those who are called "evangelicals" in America, who are often fundamentalists and emphasize what we need to do for God.

In our Second Reading, Paul states that he is obligated to preach the gospel. While the word "gospel" is often connected with "to proclaim" or "to preach," the gospel for Paul is more than just what he says to other people. It is also how he lives his life.

In this chapter, he talks about the rights he has as an apostle. He has the right to receive food and drink and money from the people he serves. He is the right to travel with a wife. He gives reasons why apostles have such rights – including quoting the law from Moses about oxen being free to eat some of the grain that they are threshing. He sums it up in verse 14: "The Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel." That's why congregations pay their pastors. Paul has a right to receive food and drink and housing and money from those to whom brings the gospel; but Paul won't do that.

He doesn't want anyone to think that he's going around preaching about Jesus because he gets free room and board. Wherever he went, he got a job as a tent maker so that he could offer the gospel free of charge – expecting nothing back for what he does for others. (Most preachers today can't do that. We need some compensation.)

He also suggests that he proclaims the gospel with more than just words: "For though I

¹ Edward F. Markquart, *Witnesses for Christ: Training for Intentional Witnessing*, student book, p. 69

² *Ibid.*

am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might gain all the more.”³ He becomes a Jew with the Jews. He becomes one without the law to those who do not have the law. He says, “I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.”⁴

We can understand this to say that Paul learns of people’s needs and seeks to bring news related to Jesus that is good to them – that speaks to their particular needs.

Our gospel lesson is about Jesus *being* news that was good to many different people. Peter’s mother-in-law has a fever. Jesus heals her. More than that, she was stuck in bed with a house full of guests. Jesus raises her up out of bed so that she can become the host she should be – and serve the guests in her house. At our study this week, someone pointed out that when she was sick – she didn’t try to get up and serve the guests in the house. I’m sure you know people like that. She stayed in bed to try and recover. Jesus brought her healing.

Just before this story, which we heard last week, there was a man with an unclean spirit. He doesn’t need a fever removed or help getting out of bed. Jesus does for him what he needs: he orders the unclean spirit to come out of him – and it does.

When he sends out his disciples, they not only are to preach the gospel, they are told to heal diseases and cast out demons – discover human needs and seek to relieve them.

I have to confess that some 50 years ago when I was sent out on gospel teams, that is not the way we did evangelism. It was more like we had our wonderful sandwich and we were going to give it to you whether you needed it or not.

An additional problem was that evangelism was only seen as the words we said to the people. The gospel is found in words. It is something proclaimed. However, it may be proclaimed even more powerfully through actions – what we do for others to help them in times of need. That is the news that is good for them at that time.

During my second year of college I was working with Young Life – a Christian group for high school kids. The older sister of one of the boys was killed in a car accident. For many of the youth, this was the first time they knew of someone who had been through such a tragedy. “We didn’t know what to say or do,” was a common statement when we talked about it. One boy agreed: “I didn’t know what to do or say either, but I went over and just sat with him.”

The boy who had lost his sister said that that’s just what he needed at the time – no words, no deeds, just the presence of a friend to sit with him. It helped him realize that he was not all alone in his turmoil.

This is the event that was on my mind when I titled this sermon: “*Being* the news that is good.” Not words. Not deeds. Just being present. Sitting and being quiet. That’s something all us can easily do. That’s all that a person might need for you to be good news.

Yesterday, I read this that a friend had posted. A group of professional people asked four to eight year-olds, “What does love mean?” This was the final and perhaps best answer.

The next door neighbor of a four-year-old was an elderly gentleman who had recently lost his wife. Upon seeing the man cry, the little boy went into the old gentleman's yard, climbed onto his lap, and just sat there. When his mother asked what he had said to the neighbor, the little boy said, 'Nothing, I just helped him cry.'

³ 1 Corinthians 9:19

⁴ 1 Corinthians 9:22b

Not words. Not deeds. Just being present. Sitting and being quiet. Sometimes helping a friend cry is the good news they need. That's *being* the news that is good.

"How can I help?" is something I should ask more than I do. Or, sometimes better, figuring out how I can help and do it without asking or being asked. Some people, even those in need, avoid asking for help.

Jesus not only proclaimed good news, he was the good news. "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends,"⁵ he not only said, but did.

He had to show us this great love, because it's what we needed. We will fail to love as he has loved us. We will fail to bring news that is good to others with words we failed to say, with deeds we failed to do, with time we failed to give. But our failures are not the last word. Christ's love for us and his forgiveness removes those failures and gives us another opportunity to be the news that is good for others. As we have received from Christ, we seek to share with others. To be a presence that is good for them.

⁵ John 15:13