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*Christ Lutheran Church, Ferndale, WA*

*Fourth Sunday after Pentecost*

*July 3, 2022*

*Isaiah 66:10-14; Psalm 66:1-9; Galatians 6:1-16; Luke 10:1-11; 16-20*

When I say the word evangelism, when I say that you are called to evangelize, how does that make you feel? I'm truly curious—how does the word evangelism or being called to evangelize make you feel?

Anxiety—I feel really uncomfortable talking about my faith to others.

Confusion—I don't know how to talk about my faith with others. Ashamed—I don't evangelize enough. (Intern Pastor Jory is taking a class on evangelism)

I think it's unfortunate that how we normally view evangelism is fraught with all these negative connotations. I think much of it is due to how some Christians have traditionally evangelized and turned others off to faith and to the church.

I'm guessing even many of us have had traumatic encounters with other Christians evangelizing to us which has left a sour taste in our mouths.

I was just telling the group from our church at Holden Village last week about my experience in a Christian cult when I was in college. This group of Christians sought me out when I was vulnerable, told me that my church was wrong and my pastors were wrong and my baptism didn't count, and said I was going to hell and my family was going to hell if we didn't believe just as they did. They scared me into believing the kind of things they did, even if what they did or said wasn't truly Christ-like. And it took me 2 ½ years and conversations with 6 pastors to get out of that mindset.

It makes sense that because of experiences we have had or witnessed, evangelizing might make us feel uncomfortable, and it also makes sense that we might feel like we don't evangelize enough, or well, or at all.

I hope today that Jesus can change your mind about what evangelism truly is and isn't, and why evangelism can be joyful and freeing. There are things I was reminded about in this gospel about evangelism which I hope can help you feel confident and joyful in your role as an evangelist.

In this gospel story from Luke Jesus is sending 70 of his followers to evangelize in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. Now this is important—Jesus didn't send his followers to do his work instead of him, he sent them to go ahead of him. Jesus never sends us to do work instead of him. Jesus will always go where he sends us, as well.

And because Jesus goes where we go, he knows what it's like to be sent to evangelize—it is like being sent out as lambs in the midst of wolves, he says. I'm guessing you might be able to relate with this. You may have a strong faith which you desperately wish your non-churchgoing family and friends would share. You might feel like a vulnerable little lamb when you think about talking about your faith with others who don't believe in God or have left the church. I imagine you get nervous thinking about evangelizing to your children or grandchildren or colleagues or friends who aren't churching. Jesus gets that, Jesus understands that.

And so Jesus gave his first followers—and gives us—a freeing and joyful way of evangelizing, which is unlike the traumatic evangelism which we might have experienced in the past.

Jesus says, when you evangelize, take nothing with you—in the gospel Jesus says you don't need to carry a purse or bag or sandals, but in our case perhaps it means that you don't have to be armed with all the right Bible verses, you don't have to have all the answers about faith or the church, you don't have to be free of questions and doubts.

And then Jesus gives us this beautiful way to evangelize—Jesus says, “Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house!’ And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person, but if not, it will return to you.” Let me emphasize this again. What Jesus is saying here is that evangelism means sharing peace with someone else. It does not mean shoving your faith down their throat or hitting them over the head with a bunch of Bible verses. To evangelize means to share peace.

Remember, Jesus was asking these 70 to go ahead of him and share peace, to prepare for him to do his work in the hearts of those whom the 70 had already met. According to Jesus, our job as Christians is not to convert people by telling them that if they don't believe in Jesus they are going to

hell, but instead to share peace, to prepare their hearts for an encounter with Jesus, and to not be discouraged if that peace is not accepted.

The way that evangelism works, the way that peace is fostered, is by building relationships. Jesus told the 70 to get to know the town and people with whom they were sharing peace with. Eat their food, heal those who were sick, don't move from one place to the next, but really get to know the people in their own context. Listen to their stories, trust their own experiences.

This reminds me of the approach of missionaries who are part of the ELCA, our denomination. The ELCA uses a theology of accompaniment when they train our missionaries whom are sent to other countries and our mission developers in this country. Accompaniment means "walking together in a solidarity that practices interdependence and mutuality." That means our missionaries get to know the culture and the people and practices of a place they are called to serve, and through relationship, solidarity, and mutuality, they share the love and life of Jesus.

When you evangelize, when you share peace, the most important thing you can do is listen. Sharing peace means opening your heart so that another's heart opens, too. When you build relationships with people by listening to their stories and experiences, it opens them up to trust you, and most importantly, to trust God.

On this weekend that celebrates freedom and independence, I hope you feel the freedom that Jesus is teaching us about evangelism. We are God's hands and heart and voice—we are evangelists—but we are not God. When we share peace, we are preparing for God to do the work in people's hearts, whether it's in a day, a year, or a lifetime from now. It is God, working through the Holy Spirit, who brings people to faith, not us. But just like the 70, we are sent ahead to prepare the way for the Holy Spirit to do that work, and we have cause for rejoicing when that happens.

I think there's one other thing our church can learn from Jesus in this gospel text. I know that in this kind-of-post-Covid context, our staff, our committees, our council are all feeling tired—we've worked so hard these past couple years and we have less and less people wanting to serve on

committees or go to meetings. I have heard many committees say, "We need more members to do our work."

What if Jesus is reminding us in this gospel that perhaps we don't need more members on committees, since he really only needed two people working together in a team to do his work. Perhaps it isn't that we need more bodies, but we need to remember and reclaim the core purpose of our ministry and not try to do it all.

As the church council recently discussed, committees don't have to do everything that they've always done in the past, or they can choose to do it differently. I applaud the Fellowship Committee which has determined that they will focus on special events instead of coffee hour each Sunday, and the Youth and Parish Ed Committees who are planning youth education every other week starting in the fall. We don't have to do it all, and what we do we don't do alone.

Perhaps the greatest promise of Jesus is that he is Jesus, and we are not. May you leave here today a more joyful evangelist as you share the peace of Christ with the world. Amen.