

THE FIRST EVANGELISM CAMPAIGN

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Today's gospel from Luke is just about guaranteed to make most Episcopalians very very nervous. This passage is the record of the first evangelism campaign in the history of the early church. We all know that nothing makes Episcopalians nervous than the infamous E word, EVANGELISM. This gospel describes what an effective Evangelism campaign looks like.

A few weeks ago we invited Marti Jones from Old Donation to come and meet with our Visitor and Newcomer Committee. The first thing she said to us was, "Let me be clear, I am the chair of the Evangelism Committee at Old Donation and I suggest you stop beating around the bush and change the name of your committee to the Evangelism Committee. Be honest, because unless you acknowledge that you are engaged in Evangelism you will fall short of your goal."

So let's be honest and make that change right here and now. When we speak of growing the church, growing our parish we are talking about Evangelism, nothing more nothing less. The Diocese of Massachusetts went so far as to take a cue from Garrison Keeler and wrote a booklet entitled, "The Shy Person's Guide to Evangelism." They ended up printing a huge number of copies and sending them all over the country. Why does this word make us nervous? Why do we hesitate with this word?

This is because we often associate the word with those in your face usually conservative people at best and the nut case standing on the corner of the public square at worst. That is how some have hi-jacked the word, but this is not what the original concept was.

The word comes from the Greek word εὐαγγέλιον, (evageliou) which means good news. An evangelist is someone who actively shares the good news of Christ. It really is that simple. I'm an evangelist and everyone of you can and should be one to. In fact Christ calls all of you to be evangelists. When you share your story about Christ you are an evangelist.

The first question is why bother? Why should we want the church to grow? This is a really important question and one that this parish needs to wrestle with. I am not going to completely answer that question, but as a parish we will be answering this question over the next several months. For if we cannot state why we exist, then we might as well close the doors. In short we are called to grow because we have an important message about God that we are called by our baptism to share with the

world. The better we do that job of sharing the good news the stronger we will be. The clearer we define that vision the more effective our evangelism.

A complete evangelism program gathers in all the parts of the church. The Diocese of Massachusetts has a wonderful four part structure to their vision of the diocese and this vision speaks to all aspects of evangelism. The four parts are, Inviting, Forming, Sending and Serving. A complete program invites people to become a part of the community. Then the new member enters into a time of formation where they learn about the good news. The next part is what we see in today's passage and that is the sending part. The member is sent out into the world to spread the word. Now in this case they are going out to prepare the people for the coming of Jesus into their town. We too are called to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus into a person's life. They go out and serve by sharing the good news, healing people, making them whole.

Now I wonder how this passage might make the concept of Evangelism a little less frightening.

First of all this is not something you do on your own. Evangelism only works when done in community. There were seventy that were sent out. This number harkens back to the 70 that Moses selected to help him in the desert. However, they were sent out in pairs, not individually. Jesus knew that this was hard work and that all needed the support of another. We do evangelism coming from a large community. We do evangelism to invite people into our community.

Then there is the issue of fear of rejection. Jesus makes clear that the seventy will face rejection. He tells them that they will face people who will not welcome them. He does say however that this is a rejection not of the person, but of Christ. You see this is not about you, this is about Christ. So how do we react when rejected? Are we supposed to go off into a corner and sulk, no! We are told to "shake the dust of the place off of our feet." This ancient gesture goes back to Israel. When crossing the border into Israel, a Jew would ceremonially shake off the dust of the foreign land. We are then told to move on until we find welcome.

The fundamentalists know their bible so well. I don't know enough to talk about Jesus. I have said this before and I will repeat myself. Since this is not about you, let God speak for you. Let the Spirit put the words in your mouth. Trust God to tell you what to say. Now we can help increase your knowledge about God, Christ, the Holy Spirit and the church in general. That is why we have formed a new Christian Formation Commission that Becky Rankin is chairing. This would be an important second part to any successful evangelism campaign. Getting people in the door is not enough. We must all be formed into disciples. This is why formation is going to be a focus of our work this year. So for those who say, I do not know enough, then tell me, tell Becky what it is that you want to know and how we might accomplish that formation. We have a good Sunday morning program and we have our EfM, but we do not have anything in between. This is the growing edge in our formation

program. Becky and I need your input to fill this gap and allow our formation program to really flourish.

People ask how has Old Donation grown from an average Sunday attendance of 170 to over 300 in seven years. Part of this is the inviting piece. Every few months they have an invitation Sunday. This is a Sunday where everyone in the congregation is asked to invite somebody to come with them. They sit with their friend or neighbor. There is a welcome bag that has information ready. The first time they did this they gave away about three bags. Now they usually give away 20!

The key is that members of that congregation have gotten over their fear of the Evangelism word. They now look at this as their call and focus. This is the sending part of the mission. Going out into the harvest. For the harvest is plentiful.

There are many people out there seeking a relationship with God They may not be able to articulate this need but, we know that they are seeking God. Some may use the word higher power. The word doesn't matter as much as the desire. God desires that we desire him. We are called to invite them into our midst, form them as disciples and then send them out into the world just like the seventy. We will rejoice as we reap the harvest and become the church God is calling us to be.

Oh and what does this have to do with patriotism and the 4th of July. Well if we are to be one nation under God, people need to know about and believe in God. That makes evangelism your patriotic duty as well.