

## Pentecost – 2020A

Acts 2:1-11

There is the story of a barber who went to a revival and was 'saved.' The preacher told him that since he was a barber and got to meet a lot of people, he could do a great work for the Lord if he would talk to them about religion and salvation. When he asked how he could get into a conversation like that with his customers, the preacher said, "Just do it casually. Talk to them about their soul, ask if their house is in order, if they are prepared to die, and so on."

The first man to come in the next day wanted a shave, so the barber put a hot towel over him, talking about the weather and what-not, and then after he had lathered the man up good, he figured it was time to get down to the religion part. He grabbed up his razor, stropped it a few times, pointed at the man, and said bluntly, "Brother, are you prepared to die?" The man jumped up and ran out of the barbershop with the lather still on his face.

Sometimes enthusiasm can run away with us - even our enthusiasm for the gospel. Just as this would-be evangelist/barber lost both a client for his business and a soul for Christ through his terrorizing technique, the Corinthian church was driving away potential church members by the narrowness of their vision. The good-hearted barber was only trying to communicate the excitement he felt about his new faith. Likewise, the Corinthian enthusiasts were confident in their discovery of the one, true key to new life in the Spirit. Yet the evangelistic style of both resulted only in inspiring fear and ostracizing inquirers from the church.

Paul told the Corinthians that the Spirit was capable of being manifest among them in nearly as many ways as there are faithful believers. Yet Paul's admonitions were gentle, for even though the haughty Corinthians (and our hapless barber) were clumsy and cloddish in their attempts, they were nonetheless trying to practice the Pentecost mandate. With their faith at the forefront of their lives, they were grappling earnestly with the question of what it meant to be a witness of the resurrection.

This notion of the church as a missionizing agent in the world is not one we "cotton up to" very readily as 2020 residents of Canada. Missions take place somewhere overseas. Missionaries are those few adventurous souls local congregations send out to distant places. What we all know to be the truth, but are afraid to think about too much, is that the local church is a missionizing, evangelizing, witnessing community for the gospel. Every time we set foot outside our church home or our family home, we are evangelists and missionaries. Through the Pentecost gift of the Holy Spirit, we now embody Christ's missional existence in the world.

What the church does internally with no intention of impacting the world outside itself is not mission. But when a local congregation understands that it is, by its nature, a constellation of mission activities, and it intentionally lives its life as a missionary body, then it begins to emerge toward becoming the authentic Church of Jesus Christ.

Just as Paul reminded the Corinthians that there are many spiritual gifts, so there are myriad ways to be a missionary. Evangelization isn't necessarily something you do while dressed in a dark suit and walking around with a bible in hand. For many Christians whose hearts are full but whose spirits are shy, lifestyle evangelism is the best way they can witness for Christ.

Lifestyle evangelists quietly demonstrate in daily living the efficacy of the gospel. In the mission of lifestyle evangelists, actions speak louder than words. All of us know dozens of these reticent representatives of Christ. These are the people who volunteer precious free hours to the local soup kitchen, homeless shelter or crisis hotline. They are always present on neighborhood "clean-up" days. They are men and women who become part of "big sister/big brother" programs. They are big families who always have a place for one more at their table.

Yet as loving and compassionate as these witnesses may be, those engaged in lifestyle evangelism are only a first step and often a "pre-evangelism" in the church's evangelizing task. A more targeted, intentional form of evangelism must also be present - relational evangelism. As a relational evangelist the Christian steps outside the safety of his or her own individuality and risks being in

direct relationship with another. It is only in loving people and developing relationships with them that others can be "loved into" the church. The missionizing text for relational evangelists is 1 Thessalonians 2:8 - "So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us."

Relational evangelists are those who surprise new friends by not only inviting them over for dinner, but inviting them to church as well (when we can do so again). A relational evangelist listens with genuine compassion to the troubles a colleague shares with them, then offers not just sympathy but the suggestion that they pray together. Relational evangelism always involves some risks, for it requires actively involving a friend, a co-worker, or a client in one's own life of faith. Relational evangelists do no less than offer mere acquaintances full membership in the family. The gift of tongues at Pentecost made it possible for all kinds of people from very different places and circumstances to confess together the glory of God and the power of the Holy Spirit.

There is a third style of evangelism which can continue the Pentecost event in the local church today. Relational evangelists usually have something in common with those to whom they witness and with whom they form friendships. Conversely membership evangelists face the greatest challenge of all - witnessing to those who have fallen away from the snug centers of acceptable society and have been flung to the far corners of marginal existence, either economically, emotionally or physically.

Membership evangelists witness to the drug addicts, the homeless, the mentally ill, all the despairing and hopeless of our postmodern society. Membership evangelists are so-called because they take upon themselves the task of, in the powerful phrase of poet Meridel le Seuer, "re-membering the dis-membered." They begin to re-member these who have been cruelly called "disposable" simply by remembering they exist. This means walking boldly into the darkest and dingiest corners of our culture. Where are these places? Try a freeway underpass on a freezing night. Try an endless hallway in a state hospital. Try any bar, seedy or swank, at 2 a.m. on a Wednesday morning.

After first remembering these people exist, membership evangelists then actively attempt to help re-member and re-knit them to the body of Christ. It takes just as much skill and patience and prayer to accomplish this spiritual re-membering as it does a gifted physician using micro-surgical techniques to reattach a severed hand, arm or leg. For those who have spent the greater part of their lives rootless and hopeless, it takes no less than the healing power of God to make the dis-membered part of the whole again.

For too long God's missionary people have let negative caricatures of evangelical witness be seen as the norm. We all know these negative types. There is "power" evangelism - where in a one-on-one confrontation the most powerful personality, not Christ's love, wins. There is "scared-saved" evangelism that terrifies people into running to the church for sanctuary and hiding from the world. There is "adds-membered" evangelism that cuts people off from the rest of life in order to create an artificially homogenous community of "faith." There is "meet your needs" evangelism that promises a specific cure for your specific weakness, regardless of what that might be. There is even "prosperity" evangelism, that promises economic rewards awaiting those who become full (paying) members.

It is time the local church took its Pentecost mandate seriously. It is time to denounce the legitimacy of all these good-news bad-mouthers. We are called to speak "about God's deeds of power" (Acts 2: 11), especially the miraculous, loving, redeeming acts of Jesus the Christ. God's grace drops us into the pond of the world to create ever-widening ripples.

Deacon Gerry

