

Matthew 28:16-20

Evangelism???

I've always had something of a "love hate relationship" with evangelism. Let's just say, if I was going to go on Facebook and post my Evangelism relationship status, it would say, "it's complicated."

You see I'm very much aware that Evangelism has a seedy past. Today I'd like to speak honestly about some of the difficult realities of this history, because I believe it's important to deal with the past if we're going to move forward into a better future. So today, let's explore some of the ways that evangelism has been damaging, and then we'll look at how Jesus intended evangelism to be used, so that we can think more creatively about helpful and positive ways of doing evangelism for today.

So maybe some of you, like myself, feel a bit uncomfortable about evangelism. Maybe it stirs up some unpleasant memories for you. When I was a kid, I didn't attend church regularly. The first memory I have of evangelism is from when I was about Natalia's age, a friend invited me to DVBS. The main thing I really remember about that day was this really scary Sunday School teacher towering over me, telling me that if I didn't pray to accept Jesus Christ into my heart as my personal saviour I was going to die and go to hell.

Well, I did pray and accept Jesus into my heart.... But I didn't ever go to near that church again. In my mind, these Christians were mean, nasty people who scared little kids!

I think it's ok to admit that some of us feel weird about evangelism. There are good reasons why we should feel weird about it. Evangelism has been used in ways that hurt and damaged a lot of people over the past two thousand years. Some of these problems date back to the Roman Empire.

When the Pagan Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, he decided he needed to order everyone else in the Empire to become a Christian, too. Literally overnight, Christianity went from being a persecuted minority religion, to being the religion of the elite. Once Emperor Constantine converted, if you wanted to stay on the Emperor's good side, you had to convert, too. People didn't want to lose their jobs or their heads, so they did it. It didn't really matter what their personal beliefs about God were. Then Constantine ordered his soldiers, whenever they captured a foreign territory, to force those people to convert to Christianity, too. Chances are, if you liked being alive, if somebody had a sharp sword up against your neck, you'd do whatever they told you to do. And that's how a lot of Europe, a lot of our ancestors, first became Christians. No wonder evangelism has a bad name.

Then we have the Crusades, when Christian Europe went and did the same thing to Muslim communities in North Africa and the Middle East. And then a bit later, we have the Doctrine of Discovery, when church leaders told people from Europe that it was OK for them to steal land from North American's indigenous people, or even to kill them, as a way of pressuring their communities to convert to Christianity. Then the church stole their children forcing them to attend Church run residential schools where 5 year old kids were beaten for speaking their own language, all in an effort to make them to become Christians.

Evangelism has a bloody history. No wonder so many of us feel uncomfortable with it.

I'm solidly convinced this is not at all what Jesus was talking about when he told his disciples to go out and proclaim the Good news in the Gospel of Matthew. In that text, Jesus commissions his disciples to go out into the world, making disciples, baptizing them, and teaching them to live in the way Jesus taught. If Jesus taught stuff like, "Love your neighbour as yourself," "pray for those who persecute you," and "judge not, lest ye be judged," then forcing someone to convert to Christianity seems pretty opposite to the actual teachings of Jesus.

Looking back at the past, it's certainly tempting to think that we should just throw out evangelism altogether. But I don't think that's the answer, either. Good News is a wonderful thing to be able to share. It's something that should be beautiful and life-giving, if in fact it really is good news. If we really do have something good, something that we personally find special and meaningful, something that's made a positive impact in our own lives, shouldn't we be sharing it with other people rather than hoarding it for ourselves?

The word "evangelist" in Greek means a person who brings good news. A person who brings good news. Now typically this meant a person who brought good news about the state of the Empire, for example, an evangelist might be somebody who brought the good news that the Roman Empire has conquered those Barbarian hordes in Briton. But within the early Christian community, this word came to take on a very particular meaning: an evangelist was somebody who brings Good News about Jesus.

So just what is that Good News about Jesus? What exactly does it consist of? In a nutshell, the good news is that God loves us, and that God has come to earth in the person of Jesus in order to connect with us. God loves everyone, and God wants to be a meaningful part of our lives. Of course, this is just the beginning of the conversation. There's a whole lot more that one could expand on. We would say a lot more about who Jesus is, what he's done, what he teaches humanity about how to live. You could say it's like reading a great article on the internet, and then discovering that it has all kinds of embedded hyperlinks that you can click on to take you into other articles. But I think the major headline in the feature article would be this: God cares about you, and God is interested in your life.

If that's what evangelism is, maybe it doesn't sound so bad, does it?

I think that when we practice evangelism with care and sensitivity for the other person, it actually can be a good thing... maybe even a life-changing thing. It was for me.

You've probably heard some of my story before let me recap for you.

When I was a kid my parents moved around a lot because of my dad's job. My family was from Essex County but I grew mostly in Alberta. We moved 6 times by the time I was in grade 4, so we never really got settled into one community long enough to find a church my family was comfortable in. By the time I was 12 we started going to an Anglican church, which I kind of had mixed feelings about. I tried to pay attention to sermons but they went pretty over my head most of the time. Then the priest my family had connected with moved on, and my family left the church. That's when I decided I was done with religion. I had some sense of God, but I figured I could worship God, if there was a God, on my own anyways. Organized religion just seemed out of touch and out of date to me.

We took a break from church for a while, but a few months later my dad's friend Kirk invited him to his church. My parents had become really good friends with Kirk and his wife, Arlene. They got together every few weeks for dinner and Kirk and my dad would both pull out their guitars and start jamming. It was incredibly embarrassing to my young teenaged self.

When Kirk invited my dad to church, he went because Kirk was his friend. I guess he figured, if Kirk liked this place so much, my dad was curious to see what it was all about. My dad came home that Sunday raving about this church that actually played guitar on Sunday mornings. He'd never seen anything like it. My dad enjoyed it so much, he decided that the rest of us should go. I was about 13 by this time, just young enough that my parents could still force me to do things against my will. When I found out that the name of this church was "Community Mennonite Fellowship," I did NOT want to go! It was Mennonite! Our neighbours were Mennonites. They drove horses and buggies and the women were forced to have, like, hundreds of children and wear weird hats (at least, that was how my teenaged self saw it at the time). I really, really, didn't want to go, but I didn't have a choice, so I went.

When I got there, I was surprised. My dad dropped me off at a youth Sunday school. I had never been called a "youth" before and I didn't know what that meant exactly. But it was a room full of teenagers, older than me. They sang songs and then they read some Bible passages and talked about them. I don't remember much else from that Sunday, except this: I found out that the youth were going to Canada's Wonderland. When you are a kid growing up in the middle of the country, Wonderland is like the trip of a lifetime. I was willing to do anything, *anything* to go.... Even shyly ask if I could come along with this group of strangers.

A week or two later, I was in the car on the way to Wonderland with a bunch of older girls. They were all talking about the missions trip to China they'd just gotten back from. I was amazed. I had never really thought about Christianity existing in other countries before... but these girls were talking about God as though God was real person, a person who helped other people. I had never thought about that before.

When we arrived at Wonderland, a bunch of the guys in another car were standing in line beside me talking about how they were going to go on this really intense bungee jumping type ride called the Extreme Sky Flyer. You had to sign a waiver saying that if you died you wouldn't sue Wonderland and you had to pay a life insurance fee just in case.

I was desperate to go on it.

None of the other girls wanted to sign up though, and you had to have a group of three, so I couldn't go. Somehow, one of the youth leaders and the pastor heard that I really, really wanted to go on this ride. They said, "Alicia, we need a group of three to go the Extreme Sky Flyer. Do you want to go on with us?" I was overjoyed. It wasn't until later that I realized the pastor was actually terrified of heights. I couldn't figure out at first, if he was that scared of heights, why did he want to go on this ride? It wasn't until later that I realized, he went on that insane ride of death because he knew how much it meant to me. He was willing to put himself entirely out of his comfort zone, just to show me hospitality. After I realized that, I decided I would give this Mennonite Church thing a chance.

That wasn't the last time the church showed me hospitality like that. I started coming to Sunday School regularly, and I remembering asking the Sunday School teachers tough questions just to see if I could make them squirm. I'd say stuff like, "If God loves gay people, why does he send them to hell?" Or, "If God can create anything, can God make a rock so big that he can't pick it up?" I remember how gracious they were with me. They would take the time to patiently talk about my questions. Or sometimes, they would just honestly say, "I don't know the answer to that." But they never laughed at me, or made me feel stupid. Rather, they went out of their way to include me and help me feel welcome. And they were honest with me about what they believed.

Over time, I heard stories about Jesus. I came to see Jesus as someone who stands in solidarity with people who are on the margins. I heard about Christians who would risk their lives to follow Jesus, people like the early Anabaptist martyrs, and more contemporary stories about people doing development work in Mexico and even Christian activists like Christian Peacemaker Teams. I became attracted to this idea of Jesus as a radical, a Jesus who makes a real difference in people's lives in practical ways. I decided that being a Christian means being a person like Jesus, a person who is willing to show radical hospitality to strangers, a person who is willing to take a risk on showing kindness to someone on the outside. I decided I wanted to live my life like Jesus.

I was evangelized by people who took a risk by showing hospitality to me.

In the postmodern world, people are not evangelized through big tent crusades, or Christian concerts, or the newest social media platforms. People definitely aren't evangelized by being shamed or made to feel guilty. People are evangelized with kindness and hospitality. People learn about Christianity by feeling safe enough to ask their honest questions without being laughed at or scolded. People are evangelized when they come to feel that they are truly valued and cared about for who they are. They need to experience God's love, and that happens when we model it for them. People come to church for the first time because a close friend invites them. If you want this church to grow, the way that will happen is when you invite your friends.

The book of James is one of my favorite letters in the Bible. It says, "Show me your faith without doing anything, and I will show you my faith by what I do (James 2:18b NCV).

Both the words we say about God and the actions that we do matter.