

SLD02.07.10 5th Ordinary
Emory Presbyterian Church
I Corinthians 15:1-11
Jill Oglesby Evans

“Handing It On”

One of the challenging things about sticking around in the ministry for a while is that, what with a three-year lectionary cycle, certain passages keep coming around on the guitar. At first it's not a problem because lectionary offers four different passages to choose from every Sunday. But two of them are from the Old Testament, one of which is a psalm, and you can only hold people's attention so long with a psalm. And, despite the dismay of Hebrew scholars, we church preachers do tend to focus more on the New Testament. Which means, after seven or eight years of parish ministry, the same texts are going to roll around again, and you gotta figure out something new to say about them.

Now when I was an interim, as I was been for most of my career in ministry, this wasn't really a problem. Chances are that whatever church I was serving at the time hadn't yet heard my particular spin on the lectionary text of the day. But stick around the same church seven or eight years (which I never thought I'd do) and, well, you just gotta deal differently with the same text. You don't get to preach the same sermon twice.

Except this coming summer. The staff and I decided to offer a Top Ten Saints in 2010 series this coming summer during which I will preach again whichever saints you choose from the summer series I've preached in the last 5-6 years. Come April or so, you'll get to vote.

But apart from that special redux event, I can't often bring myself to say the same thing about the same text. At least, not exactly the same thing, as in preaching the same sermon twice. At least not to the same people. It's just that, later in one's career it gets tempting. Because some texts just strike one a certain way, and a particular perspective can be hard to pry loose.

Today's text, for example, on which I preached here at Emory back in 2005, is so revealing of the personality of the Apostle Paul that it's hard for me to pay attention to anything else. The last time I preached it, the title of the sermon was "A Mess of A Man of God," which sums up for me perfectly both what I get out of this text and how I tend to regard the Apostle.

Not that I don't love the guy, but like so many people important to my life (my son, my parents, *you*) he also drives me crazy. Oh, I know that in the *fifteenth* chapter of Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth (Can you imagine listening to a sermon sixteen chapters long?) Paul's trying to summarize up what those wet-behind-the-ears-in-faith Corinthians really ought to know by now, which is that Christ died for our sins, was buried, and then raised on the third day, in accordance with the scriptures, lives even still through the presence of the Holy Spirit.

It wasn't as if the Corinthians hadn't heard it a thousand times before. I can see them sort of rolling their eyes like some teenager filtering out his mom's repetitive advice – Sure, sure. Yeah, we know, Paul. That's the creed; we say it every Sunday.

And of course they *should* keep the good news of the gospel central to their mind, their hearts, their bodies, as we all should, because this creed, this belief, this revelation of our risen Savior, it's important. In fact, in the faith of Jesus' followers, it's

top priority. Numero uno. The “one important thing” Curley refers to in *City Slickers*. This understanding of and relationship with Jesus Christ is, as Paul insists, of *first importance*.

Got it? Paul wants to know.

Got it, says the Corinthians.

Of course there’s what the preacher says, and then there’s who the preacher is, which is sometimes more interesting. And in the latter part of today’s text, who Paul is seems unavoidably and, to me, endearingly, revealed.

“Jesus appeared last of all to me, as one untimely born. (That’s kind of harsh) I am the least of the apostles,” says Paul, “unfit even to be called an apostle, really, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and God’s grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, actually, because I do worked harder than any of the other disciples. You realize that, don’t you?”

Hear Paul’s struggle? The guilt he carries for having persecuted the church in his former life as a Pharisee? The chip on his shoulder for coming so late to the Jesus movement that he never actually got to meet the main man? His stab at humility tussling with his fierce self-promotion, him being the hardest working of Jesus’ followers and all.

Paul really is a mess of a man of God but I find myself loving him more for his peculiar combination of energetic and insightful teaching combined with the ambiguous and inescapably flawed reality of his determinedly faithful self. Makes him seem, I don’t know, more human somehow, more accessible, more believable in a way. Because we know about Paul that he’s not just one of those painfully happy Christians

preaching preach prosperity and happy endings all the time. No, Paul struggles with his faith like we do, *and* with his weaknesses, *and* with his personality – as others do – but he sticks with the path. Soldiers on. Offers the whole package of his flawed self to the service of God with the aim of handing on the good news of Jesus Christ. Because it's of first importance. What's more, Paul seems to believe, just as that good news is by the grace of God, so is however and whatever he is. So, despite his flaws, foibles and foolishness, Paul determines to live a life that proves God's grace toward him is not in vain. By sharing the good news of Christ Jesus, getting it out there, letting people know about it, Paul's doing what all of us following Jesus are called to do, putting who he is at the service of the Lord, in order to hand on what he knows to be true.

Puts me in the mind of an unusual Christian evangelical preacher by the name of Jim Henderson. Something of an anomaly in his field, at least to those of us for whom the word "evangelism" conjures awkward silences before the Jehovah's Witnesses, Henderson asks the curious question, "What if evangelism meant just being yourself?" What if evangelism meant, not becoming more pious or holy or confident or good or anything different than you already are, but just putting yourself, just as you are, in the service of God to hand on what you know is true?

Huh?

What if "evangelism" didn't mean special techniques, persuasive rhetoric, manipulative marketing, forced spiritual intimacy, confrontational appeals to guilt or fear or an eternal reward, or any other non-normal Presbyterian behavior? What if evangelism required no walking the streets or making cold calls or girding up one's loins to witness to the Lord at the water fountain? What if it just meant being whoever and

however we are, where ever and with whomever we usually are, doing and saying whatever we usually do and say, which, for most of us, doesn't usually feature the word "Jesus" unless we're swearing. Now, that might be doable, right?

That's what Jim Henderson thinks, anyway. Noticing how many people like Jesus but don't like Jesus' people, Henderson began rethinking some of the common, programmatic approaches of traditional evangelism. Then he just threw them out. Most people don't like to evangelize, he said, and they like even less to *be* "evangelized." To be treated like a target, a project, a lost soul. Nobody likes being pitched, he said, and who can't smell a sale coming?

Completely over evangelism as a sales model, Henderson turns instead to evangelism as simply human "connection." Relational engagement. Truth telling no more intense or peculiar than story telling.

In an interview with Ira Glass on the popular radio show *This American Life*,¹ Henderson notes that Jesus didn't go around trying to sell himself. Get peoples' attention. Persuade them to believe the way he did. Instead, he went around just being who he was, *connecting* with people. Befriending them. Getting to know and care about them. Touching their lives. For Jesus, apart from a little apocalyptic angst, there was no sale to be made, no deal to be closed, no results to be measured. Jesus just was who he was, and went about loving and caring about others pretty much just as they were, all the while knowing that the truth of his story was of first importance.

And that, says Henderson, impacts people more than anything else. Not information exchange or argument or instruction but relationships. Genuine, trustworthy relationship. That's how people engage. That's when something changes for people;

¹ www.thisamericanlife.redio episode 394, "Bait and Switch," Interview with Ira Glass and Jim Henderson

when they actually connect with someone. When people actually *like* each other, says Henderson, a bunch of other rules change. So our goal, he says of his organization called “Doable Evangelism,” is (quote) “to help Christians not to be jerks.”

I find this to be encouraging, don’t you?

And the way Henderson believes Christians convinced of the first importance of Jesus’ resurrection story can avoid being jerks in their passion to share the story is to follow three simple three steps:

Number One – Notice people. Just sit around some place and watch people for a while.

Number Two – Pray for people “behind their backs.” Henderson calls this “unauthorized prayer,” prayer for which you do not ask permission. Prayer about which the other is completely unaware. Stealth prayer. Ninja prayer. Bolt from the blue prayer. Prayer when it’s least expected.

And Number Three – Listen. Ask people, “How are you?” and don’t interrupt them if they happen to tell you.

That’s it. That Jim Henderson’s grand plan of jerk-avoiding evangelism.

Notice. Pray. Listen.

In his interview with Henderson, Ira Glass, avowed agnostic, asks pointedly, “yeah, but what kind of results do you get?”

To which Henderson replies, “Our focus is not on results, it’s not to get converts. The church doesn’t need converts, it needs *disciples*. We just want Christians out there connecting with people like normal human beings. As far as making disciples goes, what if we focused more on the *starting* line than on the finish line?”

Glass: “But what if they never *get* to the finish line?”

Henderson: “That’s not our problem. That’s *God’s* problem.”

You know that goofy survey I sent out a month or so ago asking how many people you shared the love of Christ with during this last year?

First, a disclaimer – it wasn’t my idea; it was a Macedonia Ministry thing. Apparently the Cousins Foundation, who funds Macedonia Ministry, wanted to get a handle on the effectiveness of the enterprise by requesting an “approximate aggregate impact of all of the members and ministries of each of its churches on their neighborhood, their city, this country and the world.”

Good thing they only wanted an estimate, huh? I mean, how on earth can “missional touches” (that’s what they called each discrete event of Christ-sharing) be quantified on an individual level, never mind from the perspective of a whole community?!

Still, the (few) responses I got from the survey were telling. Some balked at the idea of trying to quantify such a thing. Even it *could be* quantified, others considered it gross self-promotion to share. Others, though, attempted to scan thoughtfully over the past year, considering when they had successfully shared the love of Christ.

Only, what counted and what didn’t? Did praying for the same person more than once still count as only one “missional touch?” What about praying for a group? How come we were only requesting information about our contact with people *outside* the church when so much of one we do is in support of one another?

Some gave up trying to estimate numbers and simply wrote “hundreds,” or “infinite,” “way too many to count,” or simply, with regard to praying, “constantly.”

Another wrote, “How can you count the times when the Spirit has been acting in the lives of others through your actions? That is a part of God’s work in the world based on our Baptism renewed by our participation in Holy Communion.”

One person sorted and packed 933 suture kits for people in Haiti. Another guessed she had made some 500 hospital visits in 2009. Still another noted that she has “a habit of praying for those I see walking along the side of our roads – especially young men and boys – for a sense of God’s leading and care.”

And these are just the responses of individuals! The Foundation also wanted to know how many people outside its walls the *church* reached in the neighborhood, the community, the city, and so forth. So I listed all our mission and outreach activities and made up numbers to go with them.

It was a goofy exercise in estimation, to be sure. Wanna know how many I came up with in my summary total which I labeled, “Unreliable Total?” **53, 265**

53,265 missional touches outside the church during 2009.

Wanna challenge my numbers? Feel free; your guess is as good as mine.

Point is, this is roughly the order of impact we at this church have in our community and world just by being who we are. There’s been no major evangelical program going – it’s not our style. But don’t think for a minute that, despite our flaws, foibles and foolishness, we haven’t been handing on what is of first importance in the story of our risen Jesus.

A goofy exercise, perhaps, but thought-provoking, isn’t it, to consider how many people even a church of our modest size and “sales” can touch with the love of Christ, just by being who we are? Just by doing what we do, or saying what we say, praying

how we pray, in the ordinary course of our lives? Just by being who we are, in the service of God?

Conway Twitty sings a song entitled, "All I Have to Offer You Is Me," which pretty well sums it up as far as I'm concerned. For just like faithful, fussy, ornery, on fire Paul, it's by the grace of God that we are what we are. Our job is just to make sure God's grace toward us has not been in vain.

To the glory of God. Amen.