

June 25, 2017

## Risk and Boredom

### Intro

Next week, I will accompany 7 of our youth on a trip to Washington D.C. as we learn about the social issues which contribute to homelessness. It will also be the first Independence Day in my entire life that I have not spent in Indiana. While of course the privilege of spending the 4th of July in the capital is an incredible opportunity, and I know we're all going to have an excellent trip, I think I'm allowed to still be a bit bummed out that I won't get a chance to see family this summer. Because that means I can't beat them in anything.

Now, something you should know about my family: we are obsessed with winning. Family board game nights are heated. Strong words get exchanged. Pieces thrown. Tempers lost. Volleyball games at family reunions sometimes result in injury, with very little pity. I have refused to play my brother in chess for over a decade because the last time we played, I won. And it's way more fun to hold a winning streak than it is to play another game. But I think the best way to describe how competitive my family is is to mention our traveling trophy.

Yes, we have a traveling trophy. See, every year, the college basketball world stops to focus on March Madness, the single-elimination knock-out tournament which crowns that year's national champion. And my family is *into* it. We have a bracket challenge, which isn't just a typical challenge where whoever guesses the most correct games wins. No, that'd be too simple. Instead, we have a scoring system based on the relative seeding, a round multiplier, and total score. We prep for this all year long.

The winner of that bracket challenge is awarded a chalice, which is theirs for the year. Engraved on it is our family motto - *because I'm better than you*. I wish I was kidding. We really are that competitive. The loser of that bracket challenge is punished by being required to lead the entire family in a rendition of an old German drinking song, "The Schnitzelbank" at our annual family reunion over the Fourth of July. Yes, lederhosen is often involved.

For all this, though, for the trophy and the tournament and the smack talk and the preparation and the commentary, I came up with an estimate of how many hours I actually spend watching

college basketball each year. You might be surprised that I only found about 48 hours worth over the course of a whole season.

To put that in perspective, if you go to church 90% of Sunday's over the course of a year, you are also at about 48 hours.

And yet, we don't have a church trophy, there aren't a ton of blogs, very little commentary, and there's almost no smack talk. Why is our experience of faith so different than our experience of other cultural things? Why do we find it easy to share about our hobbies and interests, but less so our personal beliefs?

Judging from my experience, the words of the prophet Jeremiah don't ring particularly true most days. Look back at verse 9: If I say, "I will not mention God, or speak any more in God's name," then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.

When was the last time you couldn't help but speak out about what God has done in your life? And yet, when was the last time you couldn't help but speak out about your thoughts on UT's football season, or Austin's traffic problems, or that really stupid political post your acquaintance put on facebook that just *begged* for you to respond to?

Faith-based evangelism is not something that comes naturally to most people, especially in our culture and context, yet sharing other things does often come easily. It's easy to go on and on about something you love, and sometimes too hard to hold back from things you disagree with, but difficult to talk about faith. Why? Why are we so different from Jeremiah?

To answer that, we're going to look at what Evangelism is perceived to be, three reasons we shy away from it, and then end with a look to Christian history for a path forward.

### **Locate Evangelism**

To start, though, I'd bet we've all had a negative experience of evangelism. Someone who doesn't respect our own journey or beliefs who wants to just enforce their concept of who or what God is. Someone who tells us we're going to hell for a specific belief or action, someone

who doesn't seem to see us as a person, but as a potential tally mark. This fall, go walk up Guad - nearly every day, you'll find someone passing out tracts, telling students they are sinners, or publically condemning strangers to the pits of Gehenna. I'm not surprised, given this landscape, that only 42% of Mainline Protestant, that is, people in churches like ours, have talked with someone about their faith over the past year.

Of course, that caricature that stands out on the sidewalk with a bullhorn isn't very representative of our faith, but perhaps our fear with evangelizing is that if we start to share about what we think God is up to, we'll get lumped in together regardless.

### **What is evangelism?**

But I think there are multiple reasons that evangelism isn't coming naturally to us, not just our fear of being seen as "that guy." If we are going to really think about what makes evangelism so hard, we first have to understand a bit about what evangelism is. And, here's where things get sticky. How does one define evangelism? Is it when our service and our charity illustrate to people what it looks like to be a Christian? Is it sharing our personal stories of what faith means to us? Is it a prescriptive, "here's the Gospel, now pray this prayer?" Does it involve bullhorns and tracts? Does evangelism have to bring others into the church, or is it enough to just show them what the inside looks like?

Consider this. According to sociologist Rodney Stark, there may have been upwards of 33 million Christians in the Roman empire by the year 350. That's at a time when the whole empire was only 60 million people total. That's a growth from Jesus calling the first few disciples in around the year 30 to 33 million followers just over 300 years later. Clearly, something was working. Before we get into what may have set the early church apart, I want to dig into that tension that makes talking directly about faith difficult for us in the Mainline.

### **So why is evangelism hard?**

A reason the bullhorn guy rubs us the wrong way is that evangelism today tends to be viewed as more than simply sharing about general beliefs. It seems that there is some pressure to be able to name exactly what it is that we as Christians believe if we are to stand up and share that with others, as if we were writing it for a scientific journal. Well, as Disciples, that clearly isn't going to

work. As a denomination, one of our major theological commitments is to the free exploration of one's own faith. We systematically value diversity of thought and opinion, and as such have very little ground to stand on when it comes to telling someone else what their faith could, or should, look like. It doesn't seem like that it is up to us to determine.

On the other side of that coin, do we all honestly know what we ourselves believe? It is hard to pin down a specific message to share when we ourselves experience growth and change in our own spiritual lives! If you believe something different than you did when you first came to faith, or first joined our church, which message would you choose to share with someone who is outside the system?

One of the best parts of officiating weddings is that you get to meet with the couple before and ask really deep questions about personal beliefs and values. As I met with a young couple a few weeks ago, we talked a bit about where they currently sat with church involvement. Both grew up in Mainline Churches, churches like ours, but only attended now with family for big holidays. Faith is important, but they don't express it through going to church. When pressed, the answer I got was that they respected the concept of spirituality too much to go some place they didn't fully buy into. I think their statement is very telling: "we don't want to reject everything, but we don't want to cherry-pick, either, and we don't know how to do that." There was a real sense of confusion, of not knowing exactly what else might be out there, and of not being sure in what they really believed in enough to commit to a faith tradition. I wonder 'how many Christians, even those who regularly attend church, are in that same boat?'

So far, we have the fear of being lumped in with those who don't represent us, and the ambiguity surrounding the message. But the overlap in our Scriptures today showcases another barrier that makes sharing our faith that much harder. Namely, sharing a message or truth about our faith is an incredibly vulnerable position to put yourself in.

Hebrew Bible scholar Susannah Larry, who happens to be a good friend and a former classmate of mine, connected the dots for me between some language in our Jeremiah passage with Hebrew marriage metaphors. Essentially, she made the claim that Jeremiah is acting as a newly-wed who has to come to terms with his wildly unrealistic expectations. He was being forced into a new role, one which he agreed to but was ill-prepared for - not unlike many newly married men. Jeremiah found himself in Jerusalem in the years preceding an invasion

from Babylon, charged with telling the Israelites about the upcoming doom. Naturally, this didn't make Jeremiah particularly popular. He recorded threats against his life, an attempted execution, beatings, and, perhaps worst of all, being right about Babylon's invasion and the destruction of the Temple. It really puts that passage in context for us - those who were denouncing him were doing so to save themselves from feeling attacked by his condemning message, and he himself was torn between his call to prophecy and his expectation that people would actually *listen* to a prophet.

This is echoed in Matthew's recording of Jesus. Our calling to share what God has set before us is always tempered by the knowledge that speaking about something counter-cultural is always going to create enemies. Worse still, it is the people closest to us, our own neighbors and parents and friends who will resist it the most. Jeremiah was rejected by his own people. Christ tells us mothers will be set against daughters. It's the same principle that makes your friends and family sabotage your diet - those closest to you feel betrayed when you change, because it necessarily changes your relationship. So sometimes, in order to not change those balances, we don't allow our own identities to change and to mold. We cling to who we were always were, or who we were always seen as. As we balance our calling to change and be public about it with maintaining our identity, we hit that same wall that Jesus calls out, the same wall that Jeremiah is lamenting here.

So to recap so far: Evangelism is hard, and we don't do it. We don't know exactly what to share, we don't know exactly what we believe, and we don't want to sacrifice our personal identities because change is always hard and makes us risk losing our relationships.

### **So what do we do about evangelism?**

So what do we do about evangelism? It's hard, it's weird, it's uncomfortable, and hey, if most people aren't doing it why should we have to? But evangelism doesn't have to be so cut and dry. It's easy to fall prey to the serve-without-sharing model, especially given the tensions having an open faith tradition, just as it's easy to stand on a corner and condemn without really having to engage with others. I think looking back at the early church provides us with a great model, if we're willing to share what God has whispered to us.

The Roman empire, in the first few centuries after Christ, was hit by incredible epidemics, devastating their population. Millions, upwards of a third, of their citizens died. In the midst of this healthcare crisis, the ruling elites simply retreated. They left their cities, moved to rural areas, and maintain a sense of luxury. They turned in and isolated themselves to escape the horrors around them. The new, fledgling Christian movement, however, was filled mostly with those too poor to escape the cities. So, they turned out, rather than in. They formed loose organizations which today we would call 'hospitals,' and cared for those who were dying. And, as it turns out, even without medication, having someone care for your basic needs is relatively effective - as the epidemics subsided, there emerged a new majority of people who had been taken in and cared for by Christians. Not only that, but they were given the explanations of *why* the Christians risked their lives to serve them. The service and the sharing went hand in hand as Christians put forth a verbal and practical illustration of hope in the midst of horror.

If you say to someone, "God made the world and here's how you are supposed to respond," it's pretty easy to ignore them. Whether they are being positive or negative, focusing on God's love or God's wrath, words are easy to shake off. And likewise, serving someone is powerful and meaningful, but doesn't do much to separate a kind person from a Christian. Just talking isn't necessarily wrong, and just serving isn't a bad thing. But those aren't in and of themselves evangelism.

Evangelism, as the early church learned, is the combination of the word of God moving through us in ways that lead us to serve others and invite them into our own lives. Building someone a house is great, but it doesn't make you their neighbor. Sharing the Gospel means literally sharing yourself, not just telling a story or doing something good. And that sharing is hard, it's messy, it will get push-back, it will change you. But the tension of Jeremiah and Jesus is that God calls us to forgo our self-preservation in the interest of building up a community. As we move through our weeks, how will you balance serving and sharing together? Who will you embody the Gospel to, and how will you invite them into your life, no matter the cost?