

June 15, 2008
Matthew 9:35-10:15

EVANGELICAL PRESBYTERIANS?

Another minister I know told me that the name of his sermon for today is “*Laughing With God.*” It’s a great title because for some reason that I have never figured out, Christians, especially those of us with a strong Puritan influence, seem to have a hard time remembering that God is fun. Way back in 1647, those Puritans came up with the Westminster Catechism. The very first Q&A is:

What is the chief and highest end of Man?

Man’s chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully enjoy him forever.

I know, it seems like the Puritans didn’t know the meaning of the word joy or any of its derivatives, but at least they had the concept right if they didn’t know how to actually put it in play.

Now, the “*Laughing With God*” title is especially appropriate for today because of our Old Testament reading about Sara and Isaac and Abraham. Remember last week we heard how Sara got into a little hot water with the Angel of the Lord when she snickered because God said she would have a baby when everybody knew she was way too old for that. So, now, the Lord has fulfilled his promise and they are all laughing with God—the name Isaac literally means “one who laughs.”

Well of course they’re laughing. Back in those days, there was nothing more important in life than having children and old Sara and old Abraham had long-since given up on having a family of their own, so nothing could have been more joyous for them than that little Isaac showing up.

Sara and Abraham trusted God, went out on a limb, and ended up with knowing the greatest possible joy.

So it's a great title for a sermon all right, but I suspect—I may be wrong because lucky for me, I don't actually have to listen to other people's sermons any more—but I suspect that sermon focuses more on the Abraham, Sara and Isaac story than the evangelical mandate in our Gospel lesson today.

That's right the Gospel lesson today is about Evangelism. The E word that makes Presbyterians avert their eyes and suddenly develop massive hearing impairment. We don't want to think about evangelism, much less talk about it. But here it is right here in the Bible. (In Luke's version of this event Jesus actually uses the word—he says go out and evangelize). And—another fact that comes as a surprise to some people—we are a biblically based church.

So, let's take a close look at what is going on here in this particular version of a story that is in all three synoptic Gospels.

Today's lesson begins by explaining that Jesus went out from town to town teaching, proclaiming the good news and curing every disease and sickness.

Everywhere Jesus goes, crowds are gathering because these people are living aimless lives, constantly under the shadow of the Roman oppression. There was no such thing as freedom of speech although the Romans were surprisingly tolerant of the Jewish religion.

Still, life was hard for those people. And something was happening. Something good was happening when the compassionate Christ came in contact with these harassed and helpless people who were like sheep without a shepherd.

But Jesus was only one person—there were plenty of people needing to hear some good news and experience some relief from their troubles, but there were not plenty of people to serve—the laborers were few.

So he summons his twelve. Now, there are a lot of important points made in this one paragraph, but we're going to focus on two of them: First, it is important to pay attention to what exactly Jesus required of the disciples. Second, we're going to pay attention to the target group because only Matthew limits the mission to the lost sheep of Israel.

First the actual direction on what they were to do. What they were to do falls into two categories: Proclaim the good news and cure people of their afflictions. I'm sure many of you are familiar with the famous saying of St. Francis: "Proclaim the Gospel at all times and as a last resort, use words."

It's a good point. There has always been a tendency among Christians to rely too heavily on words in proclaiming the Gospel. But words alone are inadequate. Very few people are going to be convinced that knowing Christ is a good thing if their only experience of Christianity is some preacher standing up in Church on Sunday morning telling them what the Bible says they have to do. Or worse, if their understanding of Christianity is formed by what they hear and see in the media. The last thing a Presbyterian wants is to be associated with some slick-talking t.v. Evangelist.

So, the service part of the instruction to the disciples is essential. Serving others is a necessary component of proclaiming the good news.

But, here is the part people don't want to think about. Service, in and of itself, is not enough. Without the conversation—without talking the talk, then the church is not distinguishable from any generic social service agency. I want to be very clear here. There is no better occupation for a Christian than public service and social service organizations are essential to

a civilized society. I am just saying that service without express gratitude for God's saving grace is not enough for Christians. We have got to be in conversation about our faith.

Now, the other important message we want to talk about today concerns the target audience. According to Matthew, Jesus placed a rigid limitation on who is to receive the good news and benefit from the healing. Only the Jews. Go nowhere among the Gentiles—A gentile basically is anybody who is not a Jew.

This directive causes some confusion for some people—does it mean that the whole message is limited to that one particular instance while Jesus was alive—are we off the hook because this story is only about Jesus' instruction to the 12 who were with him, never intended to apply to 21st century Christians? No such luck.

Don't forget how the Gospel of Matthew ends. Jesus said:

[Matthew 28:19-20] ¹⁹ *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,* ²⁰ *and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."*

So, no, we are not off the hook. Clearly, the evangelism commandment is expanded by these final words of the risen Lord. But that raises another question. If the final commandment in chapter 28—commonly referred to as the great commission supersedes the limitation in chapter 10, why did the writer of Matthew leave it in?

For one thing, this limitation is a reminder that the Christian Church is permanently rooted in Judaism. Although we have to be sensitive to the ethnic identity of contemporary Jewish people, there is a sense in which we are all Jewish. Before the gentiles were grafted in, only the descendants of

Abraham were God's covenant people. So, the limitation here emphasizes that inseparable connection Christians have to the Jewish religion.

But maybe the limitation on the sending suggests something else for us today. Maybe the point is that we in the 21st century especially need to be evangelizing to our own kind.

You know somewhere between the end of the 4th century and the end of the first millennium, Christianity became the dominant religion in the western world. For about 1500 years, if you walked down the street, or went anywhere in public, virtually everyone you met would be Christian. There was always the occasional Jew, but for the most part, this business of evangelizing, the faith sharing, gospel proclaiming, service oriented activity that Jesus commanded us to do, was done. Of course, they did a flawed job of it, but the truth is Christians had to go to the ends of the earth just to find someone who had not heard about Jesus.

And one of the things that gave Evangelism a bad name was the insistence of certain Christians on loudly and obnoxiously trying to convince all the other Christians that their particular brand of Christianity was the only "true" Christianity.

But all of the sudden, really in just the last 30 years or so, it is no longer the case that virtually everyone in America and Europe is Christian. If we started canvassing the neighborhood just within a mile of this church, I bet we would find lots of people who have no clue about the good news. But those of us who call ourselves Disciples of Christ do know about it. And according to him, we don't have any choice. We have to spread the good news.

Don't worry, I'm not going to suggest a door-to-door campaign. I am suggesting that missionary work in this day and age is not limited to third

world countries. That is not bad news. Really, because of that promise at the end of Matthew that he is with us to the end of the age, spreading the good news can be fun. So, from now on, when you think about Evangelism, just put that picture of the pushy in-your-face nut out of your mind.

There is nothing that will make you happier than serving others as we are called to do. We just have to work together as we figure out how to go about it.

Our credibility is undermined before we even start because the very words Evangelism and Evangelical have become associated with people who preach bad news instead of good, people who exploit the Gospel to extort money in exchange for false assurances, people who preach purity but offer non-specific, vague apologies without acknowledgement of the harm they have done, when their sordid philandering becomes public. Of course the public at large thinks Christians are hypocritical.

It will be hard. But, if we do it together, if this particular church becomes committed to it, we can figure it out. And, you're are going to have to trust me on this, we can have fun doing it.