

## WHY I AM UNCOMFORTABLE WITH EVANGELISM

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.

Isaiah 58:6-10 NRSV

After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!' And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.' But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, 'Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.' "Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me."

The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!" He said to them, "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20 NRSV

My first job (not counting the three days I worked at Wendy's before quitting) was at Steak n' Shake during the summer after my sophomore year in high school. It was a great job. I waited tables each night and helped close down the restaurant. I enjoyed it so much that I still love to eat at Steak n' Shake. Let me tell you, if you have ever worked at a restaurant and somehow you are still willing to eat at that same restaurant later, then it must have really been a good job.

That summer I worked with a college student named Drew. He was a drama major at Dartmouth who was home working two jobs to make money for school. He was a nice guy and he was also

an atheist, a point of view that was inconceivable to me at the time. I began praying for Drew and seeking out conversations with him so that I could help to convince him of the error of his ways. We had a number of conversations about the meaning of life, the possibility that intelligent life on earth happened by chance and other topics, but still Drew did not change his mind. Of course, neither did I.

As the summer ended, it was my last night to work with Drew and I prayed for an opportunity to share my faith with him again. I knew that if God would just give me the chance I could say the right thing that would change Drew's heart. That chance did not come. I left work that night in despair over Drew's eternal fate, and then I decided to make one last ditch effort. I drove home and got my highlighted and dog-eared Bible, scrawled a note to him inside the front cover and raced back to the restaurant. Once there, I left the Bible under his windshield wiper and turned to head home. At that moment, Drew walked out of the restaurant. His shift had ended. He asked me what I was doing. I explained and we began to talk.

Drew seemed genuinely touched that I would give him my Bible. We passed again over well-trod ground concerning the existence of God or lack thereof. I remember getting a bit emotional with him, because I just could not seem to convince him of the truth as I knew it. After all, it was up to me wasn't it? If Drew died tonight, he would certainly go to hell. Wouldn't that make me a failure? As I pondered these questions, Drew stopped and asked, "Are you even listening to me? Are you even really hearing what I'm saying to you?" I replied, "Of course, I am." As soon as I said those words however, something did not seem right. At the time, I did not know what it was, but over the years after reflecting upon my attempts to save Drew's soul, I have come to realize to my regret that I was not listening to what he was saying. I really was not interested in what Drew had to say, because I believed him to be wrong and I believed I was right. Without realizing it, my attempts to care for Drew became nothing more than self interest.

I guess I shouldn't be too hard on my sixteen year-old self. I was simply doing what I was taught to do according to my religious background. Sharing your faith with others was supposed to be an act of love; after all you were trying to help others avoid eternal damnation. Yet, as with my experience with Drew, evangelizing others can turn into something other than concern for them; it can turn into little more than a debate, where the goal is to win an argument rather than to truly care for another person.

In high school and college, I was taught arguments and counterarguments in order to respond to what a non-believer might say. I recall reading a book by the fundamentalist preacher Josh McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, which had hundreds of pages of purported evidence for the existence of God, the resurrection of Christ and other tenets of the faith. That title alone reveals the mindset of cross-examination at work in this understanding of evangelism. Rather than true concern for a person that may believe differently than you, the goal of such encounters is to win the argument, as if once they are presented with the foolishness of their own position and the unquestionable correctness of your position, others will simply fall in line. Such a mindset presumes that people with different beliefs have nothing valid to offer in return and that they possess no rational reasons for believing what they do. Approaching others in this way is arrogant and it fails to see others as people worthy of respect. The "non-believer" becomes an

object to be changed not a person to be loved. In essence, such a view reduces the mysteries of faith to a legal brief and interaction with others to a mechanical procedure.

I feel uncomfortable with this type of evangelism. The problem seems most evident to me when I am approached by a person of a different religion or denomination who wants to convert me. I resent it when someone approaches me at my front door, at the airport or in a public place holding out a tract or magazine, because I sense their presumption that I am wrong and headed for eternal damnation. There is a certain part of me that thinks, “How dare you? You don’t know anything about me.” I guess since I don’t like to be treated this way, I don’t want to do the same to others.

As Christians, we are instructed by Jesus to share our faith and make disciples wherever we are in the world. There is no getting around it. I would question, however, whether or not sharing the gospel - the good news of Jesus Christ – must involve approaching others in an arrogant and condescending manner? If so, then I will remain uncomfortable with evangelism. I hope for my sake that it does not. Also, I believe there is a deeper question at work. What exactly is this good news? Is it only about the “Sinner’s Prayer” and hellfire insurance or is the good news of Jesus much deeper and consequential than these things? I would offer that we risk trivializing what Jesus came to accomplish when we reduce evangelism to merely getting other people to agree with our own point of view.

I think that our gospel passage for today offers us some insights on what sharing one’s experience of Christ can mean and how we can do it in a way that is humble, loving and respectful. In Luke 10, Jesus sends out seventy of his followers to tell others about the Kingdom of God. He is on his way to Jerusalem for a showdown with the rulers of the world, so there is some urgency in the message. The time to follow Jesus on earth is running out. Harvest time is approaching and the laborers are few! There is no time to stop and chat with people along the road! I think that the urgency of Jesus’ situation explains why some of the instructions in this passage may seem strange or even foolish to us when we try to apply them to our present situation. Would we really want to send out our missionaries with no provisions or travel plans? Although we may not be on the same timetable as Jesus and his disciples were on their way to Jerusalem, sharing our experience with Christ is no less urgent today, because there are people who are in need of hope and belonging.

Read one way, Jesus’ instructions can sound like an invitation to arrogance. The whole business about wiping off the dust from your feet seems more than a little judgmental. Yet, when we read all of the instructions together, Jesus’ instructions seem much less condescending and confrontational and more relational and healing. Jesus tells his followers to speak “peace” to all who will accept it, to care for the physical needs of those they encounter and to sit down to share a meal with those who offer one. The dusting off of the feet is reserved for those who do not want to accept peace, healing or to sit across the table as equals. In today’s violent world, a world where religion is often the excuse for violence, things like peace, healing and commensality are needed more than ever. It is a sad thing to say, but I feel like I’m just as likely, if not more likely, to be dusting off my feet in front of a fellow Christian who does not share these values than I am to be doing the same in front of someone of a different faith.

I believe the part of this passage that holds the most relevance for us today comes in the form of Jesus' instructions regarding eating meals with others. He tells his followers not to move from house to house. In other words, do not go looking for who will give you the best accommodations—the nicest room, the fluffiest pillow, etc. Stay with the ones who welcome you and think of them and not of your own comfort. Then you should “eat what is set before you.” Twice Jesus gives this instruction, so it must be important.

Why is it important for Jesus' followers to eat what is served to them? Didn't your mother ever teach you to be a good guest and eat what you are served in someone else's home? It is just good manners. Good manners are sorely lacking in most methods of evangelism. Eating what others serve involves respecting others, entering into their lives and sharing their existence. It means sitting across the table from them and treating them as equals. You are not above them. They are not below you. By eating what you are served by another, you acknowledge that they have something worthwhile to give to you.

When I was in Ghana, I discovered my own arrogance in regards to those I came to help. One night, the pastors and their wives made us Ghanaian food for dinner. I did not like it. It was this sort of pasty flour with some rice mixed in. So, when I found a moment, I snuck off and dumped my plate in the trash. As I did so, one of the wives entered the room and saw me. She did not say a word, but her eyes were wide as if she could not believe what I was doing. I did not understand what transpired between us, but I knew I had offended her.

I came to understand later the sin I had committed. On our last day in Ghana, we were in the capital Accra in order to catch our plane. We ate at a restaurant with two of the ministers who were our guides. It was simple fare but more like what we were used to as westerners—chicken, rice and soft drinks. As a group, we ate it up and left only scraps on our plates. As one of us began to take the scraps to the trash, the ministers stopped us. They began scraping every last chicken bone and every last kernel of rice into the dirty plastic shopping bags they had picked up at the marketplace. Food was so valuable to them that they would not waste a morsel. They told us they were taking the “leftovers” back to feed their families and neighbors. Our scraps fed them for days to come, and I had thrown away a plate full of food they had given to me! I had failed to view my Ghanaian friends as equals and their gifts of food for the treasures they really were. I thought that I was the one coming to give to them, and I did not consider what they had to give to me.

When we approach others with different beliefs as if we are right and they are wrong, we reject what they have to offer to us. We view them as being unworthy of offering us any insight or truth. We fail to see in them how God is already at work. We fail to eat what is set before us. We take their gifts and throw it in the trash.

Sharing our faith should be just that—sharing. When we share, we do so as equals. The conversation is a dialogue rather than a monologue. We approach others as if they have something to give to us rather than assuming we alone possess all truth and knowledge. When viewed this way, our evangelism is not some awkward exchange between strangers but an intimate encounter between people sharing their life experiences. We speak of our faith not out of some obligation but out of attempting to be authentically ourselves as children of God.

Such dialogue and authenticity assumes, of course, that we have something worth sharing in the first place. For those of us used to the familiarity of church and the comfort of our rituals, it is worth asking what difference does our experience of Christ make in our lives as believers. Have we allowed Christ to make any real difference in our lives? Have we as a church allowed Christ to make any real difference in the life of our community? One of the reasons we may not share our faith could be because there is little if anything to share. Our spiritual life is not vital and possesses no real significance for us. Therefore there is little to talk about. This is a frightening possibility.

The prophet Isaiah spoke for God and stated that the religion God desires is a vital one that results in the oppressed going free, the naked and homeless being taken in and the hungry fed. This Godly religion is not interested in the “pointing of the finger” or the “yoke” of oppression, but comforting the afflicted. I believe this is the good news of Jesus Christ that we should be sharing but so rarely do.

Paul Palumbo, a Lutheran minister from the state of Washington, describes his experience at a previous parish which was near a notorious housing project.<sup>1</sup> Violence and drugs were rampant there. For a year, he drove by the entrance to it without entering it. He looked out his window at that area and told God he was not ready to go there. So God brought the project to him. His children went to school with kids from the project, and in the summertime, many of them came to play in his backyard. By the end of the summer, he had been invited by many kids to come meet their families. So, he finally went to the project with a bodyguard of children.

Palumbo looked at the young men loitering around as “gangstas,” but the children introduced them as “my brother” and “my cousin.” He met their parents, often mothers and grandmothers, who knew Jesus better and more personally than he did. They depended on Jesus on a daily basis under desperate circumstances in a way he never would and could never intellectually understand. Instead of bringing the Gospel to the projects, he discovered that the Gospel was already there. In order to minister to the people he came to know over many visits, he first had to let God cast out his own demons of fear, prejudice and arrogance.

Rev. Chase Peeples

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First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), St. Joseph, MO

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Palumbo, “Eating What is Set Before You (Luke 10:1-11, 16-20),” *Word and World* (Summer 2001), 297-301. You can read his stimulating reflections on this passage on-line at: [http://www.luthersem.edu/word&world/Archives/21-3\\_The\\_Law/21-3\\_Palumbo.pdf](http://www.luthersem.edu/word&world/Archives/21-3_The_Law/21-3_Palumbo.pdf).