

Christian Storytelling—Part 2:
 Evangelism – The Sharing of the Story”
 John 1: 29-42
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 “Evangelism – The Sharing of the Story”

I’ve always thought he comes across as wild and weird. A guy in the wilderness eating bugs and honey, wearing clothes made of camel’s skin. But you gotta give John the Baptist credit. He was a man of tremendous conviction.

In chapter 19 of the book our congregation has been reading together, We Make the Road by Walking, McLaren writes that, “As the son of a priest, (John grew up amid the) comfortable, privileged upper class. (He could’ve easily followed) in his father’s footsteps at the Temple in Jerusalem, offering sacrifices, officiating at festivals, and performing ritual cleansings called baptisms.”

Now, these first kind of baptisms were essential amid the ancient Hebrew tradition, “because pilgrims who came from distant lands to the Temple were understood to be ‘unclean’ as a result of their contact with people of other religions and cultures.” So they had to be cleansed... bathed in a purely ritualistic bath—or baptism, it was called—before they were able to present themselves to God at the Temple.

But John didn’t follow in his father’s footsteps. He wasn’t the least bit interested in performing *those* kind of baptisms. Maybe it was because, when your father’s a priest—or a pastor, I might add—you can see firsthand how hypocritical religious leaders can be. Or maybe, as John watched his father mitigate Temple politics, he grew disgusted by how desperately the religious establishment sought to maintain its own authority, rather than tending to the needs of God’s children.

Either way, John wasn’t interested in the kind of baptism that helped the religious authorities keep the status quo. He was interested in the kind of baptism that helps people see the truth of who and whose they are. God’s beloved. Named. Claimed. And blessed to be a blessing.

That’s why John’s baptismal proclamation was “repent.” Not repent from doing bad things. But repent in terms of “think again!” “Reconsider your assumptions. Take a new look at your precious, God-given life, and how you God invites you to participate in what God is doing in the world.”

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As we explored last week, John’s new understanding of baptism not only drew throngs of people to be baptized in the Jordan... it drew Jesus Christ himself.

Initially, John resisted, saying, “I can’t baptize you, Jesus. You should be the one to baptize me.” But Jesus insisted. Jesus knew he needed what we all need. He needed to see... he

needed to hear... he needed to feel the deep down truth of who and whose he was. God's "Beloved." Blessed to be a blessing.

So John baptized Jesus in the Jordan River that day, which marked the beginning of Jesus' ministry. The beginning of his story. Just as baptism stands as the beginning to your and my stories of discipleship, too.

As we said, it's NOT that God *only* loves the baptized or that everyone HAS to be baptized. Rather, at the font, we're blessed to see, and hear, and feel this covenant of love expressed in water. We get to witness... and live life remembering... that we are named... and claimed... and blessed with gifts, and worth, and purpose.

And when you understand yourself to be loved... when you come to trust that God not only deems you worthy and precious, but calls you to be God's blessings in the world... that changes things.

Call it repentance. Or call it changing the lens through which you see the world. Either way, it's transformational to understand that nothing you do can ever separate you from God's love and claim upon you.

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But as important as the Christian faith understands baptism to be—as much as we are called to help people uncover God's love for them—for decades now, we've known that such faith is on the decline in North America. Specifically, baptisms are on the decline. We know that, because churches keep these statistics. And across the denominational spectrum—from progressive to conservative and everything in-between—the number of baptisms is decreasing year by year.

You can see its symptoms in the number of longstanding churches that have been forced to close their doors.

And in the research showing that while a majority of high school students celebrate the secular holiday of Christmas, a majority do not know the Christian story of Christmas.

These trends could be witnessed as far back as the 60's. But it wasn't truly studied until the 80's. And it didn't truly start to alarm the church, really, until the 90's. And by the turn of the century, the trend had picked up so much momentum folks began to wonder if the decline could be stopped.

It's why, in most churches, some of the most common refrains you'll hear are, "We need new members" and "We need more revenue." Cries of a church worried about its mere survival.

In a presbytery I previously served, the governing board called the Mission Council saw this trend affecting almost all of its churches. So they planned to bring a coach in to train pastors in specialized area of ministry, hoping this would help. To clarify what the pastors needed help with, however, they asked them. What do you want coaching on?

And do you know the overwhelming response? Evangelism and Stewardship. Two areas of ministry mainline pastors had largely hidden from. But the trend had grown so undeniable in some areas of the church that even pastors who'd sworn off all things evangelical began to study it left and right.

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And I admit... I was one of those pastors who'd sworn it off. Evangelism made me incredibly uncomfortable because I associated it with my least favorite attributes of the church.

For one, I connected evangelistic ministries with evangelical politics. And I wanted nothing to do with the socially exclusive activism of the Christian Coalition or the Moral Majority.

But in hindsight, I realize that I was also confused on the difference between what the Evangelical Church does, and the ministry of evangelism. Or, perhaps better said, I was confusing the difference between evangelism and proselytizing.

You see, evangelism simply means sharing good news. Evangelism is what happens when you share a story. That's all. But proselytizing... proselytizing is what you do when you try to convince someone that you're right and they're wrong. Proselytizing is what happens when you try to "convert" another to your way of thinking. To get them to believe what you believe. To convert them to your religion, as if what and who they are is wrong.

That was my original understanding evangelism. Judgmental, socially exclusive activism combined with proselytizing. And I wanted nothing to do with it.

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I carried that understanding of evangelism all the way through seminary and into my first call in ministry. It was there, however, that I began to realize I needed to rethink my aversion to evangelism if I was going to serve that church as fully as I could.

But the process was slow-going at first. Largely because I was so averse... so afraid of doing anything that seemed remotely evangelical.

Eventually, I realized I needed to go back to the beginning and sort of start all over with evangelism. So across the next five years, that's what I did. I dove into books and shared conversations with colleagues and mentors as I tried to come to grips with what evangelism truly is, and why I'd become so averse to it.

As I did, I slowly began to realize, my problem wasn't really with evangelism, but with the way I kept seeing the Church approach it.

"We need new members," churches say. "We need more money."

Truth is, those two statements are, most often, what drive a church's evangelical ministries. Church communities think they need more members to survive. Or maybe they want more members or more resources because they think bigger is better. A bigger church with a bigger budget that has bigger ministries is better, somehow, than a smaller church with a smaller budget?

But here's what I realized. Evangelism should have *nothing* to do with what the Church *thinks* it needs. Because evangelism really shouldn't be about the church's survival at all.

Rather, the reason I now believe evangelism is so important.... And the reason I believe every disciple should engage in it is simply this: *everyone* deserves the chance to connect their story to Christ's story. Everyone deserves an opportunity to connect their story to Christ's story.

Just as we—you and I—have been blessed to connect the story of our lives to the love and grace of God in Jesus Christ, so, too, do they. All of them. Whoever “they” may be.

They, too, deserve to understand that they are loved in a way far deeper than they ever realized before.

God wants them, too, to understand that even their worst sin, even their greatest shame doesn’t get to define them.

They, too, deserve to know that their worth isn’t measured by their income, their orientation, their education background, their ethnicity, national origin or citizenship or anything other than the grace of God.

And God wants them to live life knowing that they are named, claimed, and blessed to be a blessing. Blessed with a purpose. Blessed with the chance make a difference in this world as they respond to God’s gifts within them.

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That’s why I believe evangelism is so crucial to the life of discipleship.

And it’s why evangelism excites me today. *Now there’s a statement I couldn’t have dreamed of saying even 10 years ago.* But it’s true. Evangelism excites me.

And *you’re* a big reason why, Towson Presbyterian Church. For while it’s true that the overall church is in decline across North America, it’s also true that you, TPC, are one of the growing beautiful bumps in the midst of it all.

Across the past three years, Towson Presbyterian, you have grown both qualitatively and quantitatively. Your worship attendance is higher than it’s been in five years, and your giving in 2019 was nothing short of extraordinarily generous.

Those aren’t marks of success, mind you, but they are marks of a Church that at least knows something about evangelism.

What’s more, we’re perpetually uncovering that while fewer people may be participating in organized religion than they have before, this is not due to a rejection of faith itself. In fact, “research shows that among all those millennials who say they’re (not religiously affiliated at all), only about half call themselves atheists or agnostics.” The other half proves open to spiritual conversations as they seek to uncover more and more of who they are, the gifts they have, and the best ways to use them.

So please understand the people around us are just as hungry as they’ve ever been to find both meaning and belonging in their lives. Like us, they understand life would be fuller if they had a deeper sense of who they are and to whom they belonged. It’s why so many are still looking for meaning, and experience, and purpose. They’re spiritually hungry.

But they need help finding what they’re hungry for. Like all of us, they need someone to point them in the direction of where to look...

They need, quite frankly, someone like John the Baptist. One who spent his entire ministry NOT telling people what to believe... but who spent his ministry simply pointing people to the new possibility... the new life... the new kingdom that had come into the world in Jesus Christ.

“Look!” John yelled. “Look right there, Behold the Lamb of God who changes the world!” He said, “I might baptize you with water, but he baptizes you with grace and love that will change your life forever.”

John understood his ministry wasn't about himself—but about pointing people to the new way of life Christ had come to reveal.

So much so that, when Jesus happened to pass John one day when John was standing with two of his own disciples, John pointed Jesus out to them. “Hey, you see that guy?” John asked his own disciples. “That's Jesus. The Lamb of God. The Messiah I've been telling you about. He's the one God has sent to show you who you truly are, and the world as it should truly be. You shouldn't be following me. Go and follow him,” John said. And they did. John told his own disciples to go and follow Jesus. He pointed them to Jesus.

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While the church easily slips into thinking evangelism is about the church's own health... or even the church's own survival, in truth evangelism isn't about us, or even religion.

Evangelism is simply helping hungry, searching, broken connect the story of their life with the story of God's unconditional love and grace for them.

It's helping them connect their life with the story that eases grief, builds hope, deepens peace, and spreads love.

And it's the story that you and I, friends, are called, in our baptisms, to share.

So let's get over our aversion. Seriously. It's time to start pointing people to the love and grace in which we place our lives, and in which they deserve to place theirs.

Amen.