

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Today, we get a chance to tackle everyone's favorite topic in the Episcopal Church: evangelism. For people who seem to like their faith tradition so much, we are not very good at telling other people about it. In our women's Bible study on Tuesday, Mary Anne Hornbuckle asked our warmup question, which was something along the lines of what are your most holy spaces, where do you experience God most fully. So many great answers were shared about our different thin spaces, those places and spaces in our lives where we see, hear, and feel God most fully and clearly. Unsurprisingly, many of the people in our class said that they felt God most fully at Ascension, more specifically, in this very space, right here in the sanctuary. While this church is beautiful, I think the reason many of us feel this church reveals God to us so clearly has little to do with the physical space. It's what goes on in this space that really brings us deeper into the presence of our Lord. This church, this congregation, has been worshiping God and caring for others in this little corner of Vestavia for over seventy years. Think of all the weddings celebrated here, all the people we've loved and lost and prayed for as we've turned them back over to God in our burial services, all the Easter egg hunts, all the candle light Christmas Eve services. Think of the feet washed on each Maundy Thursday service, the food collected and distributed to our neighbors in need, all the small conversations and catch ups every Sunday morning, all the people that have knelt at this altar to be nourished and strengthened by so, so many Eucharistic celebrations. Seventy years of people coming to this place, being in community and communion with each other, helping each other walk closer with God, encouraging each other, challenging each other, inspiring each other, praying for, celebrating with, and consoling each other.

Of course, over and above all of our experiences with each other in this space, there are the things we learn about God here, deep truths revealed to us in our worship and study as we learn about the creator and redeemer of the universe who has loved us and will love us through eternity, truths about a God who is willing to work with us even when we're wrong or stubborn or cruel, a God who is willing to come and meet us where we are, who teaches us, day by day, how to be better people and better followers, a God who is willing to die for us rather than lose us. In this space, together, we have learned about who God is and what God values – justice, and mercy, and care, and compassion, and empathy. It is here, week after week, that we learn about God's particular care for the poor, the lowly, the oppressed, and those who cannot fight for themselves. It is here that we are reminded, weekly, that we are called to care for those people, too, here where we are encouraged to recommit ourselves to God's causes, to not let ourselves be lulled by the cheap promises of this world so much so that we forget the promises of the next. In this space, we recommit ourselves to God in every visit to the table for communion, in every successive baptism, in every prayer and hymn.

It's no wonder so many people in our Bible study said this is where they experience God most clearly and fully. I experience God here, too, each week I worship and celebrate with you all. I'm sure you have your own things you would add to the list of reasons why you keep coming back, why you keep finding yourself here. I'm sure you have your own list of things you've learned about God, informed by scriptures, and maybe a sermon or two, and certainly from your fellow Christians who've also found their way into this space and have kept finding reasons to stay.

For us Episcopalians, figuring out the “why” never seems to be hard part, why we’re here, why we love this church and this faith. The harder part, it seems, is figuring out how to tell other people about what we’ve found here, why it’s so meaningful to us, and how it is transforming our lives. If you find it hard to talk about your faith with others, just know you’re not alone. But it should stop and give us pause when we find it easier to tell people about a great book we’ve just read or a fun show we’ve just watched, while we struggle to tell people about how much our lives have been transformed by being in relationship with our loving God.

Today’s Gospel reading from Luke reminds us that telling other people about our faith has been something that Christians have been called to from the very beginning. We read today about Jesus sending seventy of us followers into all the surrounding cities and towns to tell people the same message: that the kingdom of heaven has drawn near, and nothing can be the same now that it has.

Through the years, that call to evangelism remains the same for all of us who would call ourselves followers of Christ. We have something precious here, and it’s our job to share it with a world that very much needs to hear Good News. And while the times and places have changed over the years, the fact that people desperately need to hear about the love of God has not. Study after study shows that far too many people today feel lonely, despondent, divided, purposeless, and lost, that people are searching for things that provide meaning, that give them hope, that make them feel like they belong and like they are loved. We have a story to tell, the best story ever told, about a God who loves us so very much, who created us just to be in relationship with us, who redeems us and sustains us, and who calls us into important work, who gives us vocations and gifts that equip us to go out into the world and make it a better place, especially for

those who are downtrodden, oppressed, and hurting, people on the margins and people who need to know how loved they are.

As long as there have been followers of Jesus, God has called those people to tell even more people about this life of faith. The world tells us to hoard or safeguard the things in our lives we find important or precious. God tells us to share it. The world tells us there isn't enough space, aren't enough resources. God tells us there is always more room, always enough stuff. The world tells us that we need to be distrustful of outsiders, to make sure we care for our own first. God reminds us that we cannot truly know God or each other until all nations and races and people are finally drawn together, included, and unified.

We have a story to tell, one steeped in love and hope, one that is far too precious to keep to ourselves. We live in a world that is far too mired in hate and divisiveness, and we do ourselves and the people around no favors when we keep this story of God's all-encompassing love to ourselves. So our goal then, as followers of Jesus in this day and age, is to figure out how to tell the Good News, how to share what we've found here and the story of why we keep coming back, to tell others how our lives have been transformed, and to invite them deeper into the presence of that same transforming love. This is the work that each and every one of us is called into. It's a message too important, too desperately needed not to share.