

“An Evangelistic Heart” by Pastor Leah Rosso

Matthew

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During the month of May, we have been focused on what a growing faith can look like and what we need for a growing faith. We began after Easter hearing stories of adults who have experienced God in their lives in the past year and what those journeys sounded like. We have talked about God’s calling in our lives and Amanda preached a couple of weeks ago about the healthy, holy habits of reading scripture and being in prayer. And then last week, if you were here or worshiped with us online, we witnessed together many of our young people confirm their baptisms and taking the very public step of saying they want to continue growing in faith with this community. There have been so many ways we’ve seen the Holy Spirit growing! So today, as we continue with our series, Ever-growing Faith, I want to spend a little time on exploring what it means to have an evangelistic heart.

Now, it’s worth acknowledging that your heart may have just dropped when I used that word evangelistic. At my last church we jokingly and maybe not so humorously called it the “e-word.” Truth be told, a certain kind of evangelism has probably done more damage than swear words ever could. And so I want to start there this morning. As a church that’s practicing and striving to be trauma informed and trauma responsive, we are very aware of all of the trauma people carry because of church. It’s perhaps not surprising that something that means so much to each of us can be used in harmful as well as healing ways because we are humans with the capability of doing much harm and much good. It’s no secret that even the very reason we are here — that a Methodist circuit rider rode a horse across country to get to Minnesota— the roads he must’ve ridden on; the people he would’ve stayed with along the way; the culture itself of trying to spread the Gospel had tragic effects on native people, both intentional and unintentional. So even aside from our own experience of evangelism, we see trauma in the wake of those who were building the church. And then we add in our own modern day experiences, and again it’s not surprising why people tend to scowl and shut down and get angry when they hear the word evangelism.

So today we need to hold that and name it and recognize it and even confess the ways the systems that we were born into are a part of all of that; and truly be on the look out for ways we continue to perpetuate those systems.

And, we also hold these scriptures in which Jesus tells us to be a light on a hill; to be salt for the earth; to be a beacon. Ironically, when we look at the way Jesus had an evangelistic heart, he healed people; he fed people; he challenged the ways in which rich people were hoarding resources; he reached out to those who were on the margins that no one could imagine that God loved, and he showed them love. Which

leads us to the definition of evangelism, which is a Greek word that literally means “good news.”

So if we think about how Jesus lived and shared his faith and understanding of God; and we take this word with its original meaning of being good news; I think we can begin to see what our faith and our God calls us to— to share joy and light and life and love. When I was in seminary, all of my professors frequently would say, “if it’s not good news for the poor, it isn’t good news.” And I have found that to be a true measure of when the sharing of Jesus is helpful and healing and grounding, and when it is not.

It’s one of the reasons I really like these metaphors that Jesus offers us. Take light for example. To be a lighthouse, as the kids sang about last week, or a candle in the dark, is to be helpful; to steer people away from dangerous waters; to provide warmth and a way to see. While camping in the boundary waters, there have been times when a campfire has brought a stranger who was lost and wet and needed a bit of shelter and warmth; and we were glad to share our fire. But as we can see in the flames that are rampant in northern Minnesota right now, there are ways to share that are not only unhelpful, but downright destructive. And it is necessary for us, as people of faith, to know the difference between offering light because we’ve enjoyed the warmth and joy and want to share it with others; versus trying to burn our neighbor.

Or take salt. There was a time in my life when I thought all salt was bad for my health and so I never used it. But I learned fairly quickly that just enough salt brings out the flavors of food; it’s not just about making something salty; there’s something inherent in salt that helps other flavors shine. And yet I also remember a baking incident when I was small when I mixed up the salt and the sugar in a cookie recipe. And I can tell you there was no joy in that. They all had to be tossed in the trash. Jesus’ metaphor for our faith is right on. When we are able to share the joy we experience from God; the love that holds us and makes hard things possible; then to share our faith with others can bring out the goodness of all our lives. But when we try to control others through conversion; scare people into believing; offer people an angry God only loves them if they do certain things; it is like making cookies with salt; or dumping a cup of salt into a soup— no one will eat it. Jesus knew all too well the deathly affects of salt, since he lived by the Dead Sea— here was a lake no one could fish in; where the living water of the Jordan River goes to become a place where nothing lives. Jesus doesn’t want our churches or our communities or our families to be places like the Dead Sea— where faith is toxic; rather, Jesus desires for us to share how God has been a part of our lives in a way that is invitational— offering to others a way of seeing and living in the world that makes everything about life more flavorful and that gives us a way to live that is good news for all.

If you've ever been on a trip somewhere, you know the excitement and passion that you feel when you return to tell everyone about it. If you've ever enjoyed a good meal; or found a good deal at Costco; or made a change in your life that opened up your world, than you know what it is to have something so good in your life that you just can't wait to share it. How much more with our faith. When we are able to articulate with wonder and excitement and humility our own experience of God's love; of the joy of community; of the image of Christ that we see in one another, we make it possible for others to see how God is at work in their own lives as well.

That's having an evangelistic heart— to want to share our own experiences of God with others, not expecting they'll have the same ones; but rather as a witness to help others know that God loves them too in ways that we'll be excited to hear about when they are able or willing to share them.

But there's another part to an evangelistic heart that goes back to the saying I shared before about the definition of evangelism— that it means good news, and specifically, when you read the Bible, it is about good news with the poor and the marginalized.

I saw this kind of good news shared as people gathered to honor the anniversary of George Floyd's murder and to speak into all the ways our legal system and our treatment of black and brown people in that system needs fixing and healing.

I see this kind of good news with the movement that the Methodist Church is a part of in Washington DC, speaking out about all of the cuts in what is ironically called the Big Beautiful Bill because there's nothing beautiful in it for those who are poor— it cuts funding for feeding children and their families by 300 billion.

If you look around you will see good news of people coming together to fight for healthcare for all— right here in Minnesota— and they don't always win, that's for sure — but we keep fighting so that all people, whether you are blue collar or white collar or documented or undocumented or cis or trans or a child or an adult or a veteran or a civilian— can have access to care for your own body for health and wellness.

In every generation people who follow Jesus have had to hold accountable those in power when they think good news excludes the poor; today is no different.

Jesus invites us, not only to be salt and light for one another; but to be love for this world— to have an evangelistic heart that is open to see where there is suffering and to stand with those who need someone standing with them; to be open to how friends and family and strangers need love in their lives in ways that we may be able to help with; to be like all those who have come before us, and bear witness to the love of

God in this world and then share what we see, so that together we can learn how to forgive; how to heal and accept healing; how to love and be loved.

So I want to invite you to close your eyes for a moment this morning, or soften your gaze, and bring to mind the faces of people who have taught you what love looks like. Think of someone in your life that has been able to love you unconditionally— maybe it's someone who knew you well; maybe it's someone you didn't know well who surprised you with their generosity and kindness! Take a moment and thank God for that person or persons. Take a moment to name for yourself the ways they were salt and light for you. And then ask God, "What can I do this week to be salt? God, where do you want me to be light?" And who do I need with me? Jesus calls us as a church to do this together— to share God's love and to stand with those around us who need some light— and to make sure there is good news for all.