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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
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Luke 10:25-37

“Plotting Kindness”

Two weeks ago we began a sermon series I’ve titled “Here’s the Church, Here’s the Steeple, Walk Inside and See all the . . .” But as we heard two weeks week, churches are not filled with nearly as many people as they used to be. In fact, some people say that mainline denominations have lost a couple of generations of people. There are a variety of reasons given for why people don’t come to church anymore; so many reasons we won’t be able to cover all of them. But back in July, Ross Douthat, op-ed writer for the NYT, wrote that the reason liberal churches are dying is that the people in them have gotten too wishy-washy and therefore, no longer has a compelling mission to share. And without a compelling mission, people no longer see a reason to go. I have to say, I think there’s some truth to his premise that liberal Christians have gotten too wishy-washy; or at least, that is sometimes the appearance we can give off.

Because we no longer talk about what we believe. We stopped sharing our compelling mission. We stopped talking about the wonderful God we believe in, a God who seeks the lost, and tends to the broken, a God who puts mercy ahead of law, and compassion before custom, and God who forgives sinners and welcomes all people to the table. We stopped talking about this God; we stopped sharing the good news of this God with people we meet and care about.

And so, two weeks ago I set out with the mission to make evangelists out of all of you, an idea that probably makes some of you want to go running for the door. Last week I gave you more detailed explanation of what I believe is evangelism. It is, as someone wrote, sharing “**something** we enjoy with someone we like.” (*Martha Grace Reese, “Unbinding the Gospel-Real Life Evangelism”, 97*) Evangelism is sharing our hope, our faith, and our belief that God is loving and active in the world. Evangelism is not, at least in my opinion, is not strong-arming someone into believing what we believe. There are people who think that’s what evangelism is, and perhaps you did, too, before I gave you a different way of thinking about evangelism. I, personally, do not want to strong arm people because I myself don’t want to be strong armed. But I do want people to know about God’s love, a love I believe Christ embodied; and I believe that love can make a difference in people’s lives because it has made a difference in mine and I can’t imagine my life without that love.

But even with this benign, non-confrontational definition of evangelism, my guess is that most of you would rather have a root canal than share your faith with other people. Most of you when presented with the opportunity to share your faith would flee in the opposite direction, just like Jonah did when God told him to “Get up, go to Ninevah, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” Most of you would probably flee in the opposite direction of Ninevah, just like Jonah did.

A couple of months when I was given the opportunity to share my faith, I fled in the opposite. I was caught in one of those awkward situations where I'm at a dinner party, someone finds out what I do for a living, and then proceeds to tell me everything they believe about Jesus. None of which resembles what I believe about Jesus. And this person was strident. And went on, and on, and on. I was stuck. My husband, who I thought loved me, and had long ago made his way for the bar never to return. People would sit down, hear the conversation, and quickly leave. And I just sat there. Not knowing what to say, occasionally muttering something less than coherent like, "Yeah, I just don't quite see it that way," which only made the conversation go on longer.

Somehow or other by the grace of God I made my way out of the conversation and towards the door and told Terry, "Don't ever do that again. You ditched me!"

Now, I didn't share my faith-or in this case defend it-because I was taught to be polite in public. Like Jonah, I fled.

But friends, what happened to Jonah when he fled from God's commands?

Ah yes, he was swallowed by a big fish. Whale, fish, whatever, the important point is that he was swallowed whole and sat there for 3 days and 3 nights until he finally conceded to go to Ninevah.

Now, despite my great fear of the movie Jaws, I don't believe that any of us here are going to get swallowed up by a big fish if we don't share our faith. But I do think we need to get serious about it, because even though a fish might not swallow us, other things will. We'll get swallowed by a louder, more strident form of Christianity, such as the one I was getting swallowed by at the dinner party. And then Douthat's hypothesis that liberal Christianity can't be saved will come true.

In 2010, novelist Anne Rice officially quit Christianity. It being 2010, she made the declaration on her Facebook page:

"Today I quit being a Christian. I'm out. I remain committed to Christ as always, but not to being 'Christian' or to being part of Christianity." She further explained: I refuse to be anti-feminist. I refuse to be anti-artificial birth control. I refuse to be anti-Democrat. I refuse to be anti-secular humanism. I refuse to be anti-science. I refuse to be anti-life. In the name of Christ, I quit Christianity and being Christian. Amen."

Within twenty-four hours, more than four thousand people gave Rice's Facebook declaration a thumbs-up, and tens of thousands more shared or retweeted it. Rice's statement seemed a little odd, though, since her return to Catholicism a decade earlier had been big news.

Now, her departure was big news.

But, as Diana Butler Bass says in her book Christianity After Religion: The End of the Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening, “Rice’s confession did not go viral simply because she is famous. Rather . . . She struck a cultural chord. She said what others only suspect or feel or secretly think— that there is a profound and painful disconnect between what Christianity (and other religions as well) has become and what we perceive that it should be.”

Thankfully, there are people who are sticking with Christianity even though they agree with what Rice wrote and how she feels. And yet, even these people—and I count myself among them—suffer from what Brian McLaren calls CRIS, *conflicted religious identity syndrome*. You probably suffer from CRIS, too, if you find yourself putting qualifiers, adjectives, in front of the word Christian. For example, if you find yourself saying to people “I’m a liberal Christian”, or “progressive Christian” or “not one of those Christians” or “I’m a Christian but . . .”; if you find yourself defining what type of Christian you are, you probably suffer from CRIS.

If you twitch when a Florida pastor makes an Islamaphobe video, or a pastor declares the Haitian earthquake was God’s punishment for the Haitians’ sins, or Fred Phelps shows up at a military funeral, you suffer from CRIS.

But as McLaren points out in his book Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road, CRIS isn’t just a Christian problem. There are militant Muslims, Jews, atheists, Buddhists, Hindus. All religions have their militant extremes.

What those of us with CRIS are trying to distance ourselves from is religious hostility, which is the idea that in the name of religion we must keep our distance from those that oppose us. That in order to be right, someone else needs to be wrong.

But deep down we know that hostility isn’t the answer. That the path to peace isn’t filled with more hostility, or all of us believing the same thing. That somehow there can be unity in diversity. The trick is, how? If hostility, characterized by a strong religious identity, is one end of the spectrum, what’s on the other end?

Well McLaren argues, sort of like Douthat does, that at the other end is this sort of wishy-washy, weak but benign identity . . . one that waters down what we believe, keeps silent about what we believe, so that we can all get along. Most liberal Christians would find themselves at this end of the spectrum. I was on this spectrum with my dinner party companion, keeping silent so that we can all just get along.

But I can tell you, I sure didn’t feel very faithful. That conversation gnawed at me. Why didn’t I stick up for what I believe, I kept asking myself. Why didn’t I say more? By keeping silent I probably played into every stereotype he has of liberal Christians: that we stand for nothing; that we don’t believe much of anything; no wonder her church is so small and mine is so big. All of those things. Why didn’t I say something?

Of course, I didn't say anything because I wanted to be polite. I didn't want to get into an argument with him, which would have raised his hostility and mine, too. And that would have gotten us no where. So what's the answer?

McLaren says the answer is to have a strong identity; hold fast to what you believe! But do so in a way that is benevolent, generous and hospitable. Which is much more than just being tolerant or nice, but is meeting the other person where they are with a spirit of goodwill that seeks to find common ground and solidarity. In other words, rather than being defined by our differences, we will be defined by what we hold in common while still maintaining a strong Christian identity (or in the case of a Muslim a strong Muslim identity or for a Jew a strong Jewish identity). We will rise about the polarities and instead maintain a strong religious identity while working in solidarity with people of other faiths.

Friends, I know that this sort of thing is possible because I've experienced it. Some of my closest, most religious friends have been other faiths. One of my dearest friends studied for her bat mitzvah while in college, and I was honored when she asked me to play the organ for it. I am as eager to attend someone's bar mitzvah as I am to see someone go through confirmation. This past Christmas we had dinner at the Onkens house and along for the celebration were the Hubers, good friends of theirs, and Hallie's parents. When it came time for grace, someone asked Hallie and her Mom if they'd like to offer it, which they did and stayed true to their Jewish identity by offering a blessing over the wine. Afterwards my sister, "Was that sort of odd to have a Jewish blessing on Christmas." To someone with a strong, hostile identity-probably. But for me, I think the Prince of Peace would have been pleased. After all, isn't that what Christmas is all about? Celebrating the birth of Christ who, I believe, came to tear down the walls divide, not build new ones?

Friends, the parable of the Good Samaritan which is so familiar to us, is a lesson in just this: that Christ came to transcend boundaries, not create new ones. You know the story: a lawyer asks Jesus how he can inherit moral life, and the lawyer correctly answers by stating the law: I shall the Lord my God with all my heart, soul, strength and mind and my neighbor as myself."

But not content with that answer, the lawyer wants to further define things. "Well, who exactlt is my neighbor," he asks Jesus. Which is when Jesus tells him the parable about the man who fell into the hands of robbers and was left for dead on the side of the road. A priest passed him by without helping; a Levite passed him by without helping. But lo and behold who should walk by a Samaritan, the very enemy and nemesis of a faithful Jew. A Samaritan would have been "the other", someone today we would treat with hostility. And of course, we all know who helped the poor guy left for dead . . .the Samaritan.

Which of these was the neighbor, Jesus asks?

The one who showed him mercy, the lawyer said. "Go, and do likewise," Jesus replied.

Friends, genuine compassion, kindness and generosity are not extended to any one group based on what creed a person does or does not live by. genuine compassion, kindness and generosity are extended to anyone who shows mercy.

You cannot avoid the absolutely unique and radical idea Jesus proposes in this story of religious inclusiveness, despite the fact that one of the functions of a religion has always been to define the boundaries of the tribe—who is in and who is out, who is friend and who is enemy. But here Jesus proposes a new idea: a religion that transcends the boundaries and reaches out; religion that is “moved by compassion” and regards the other, whomever he or she is, as a beloved child of God, deserving of love and care and compassion and acceptance and dignity and freedom and full life—black-white, male-female, rich-poor, Muslim-Jew, gay-straight, Republican-Democrat, liberal-conservative. Goodness, according to Jesus, is having compassion for another human being, regardless of who he or she is or what he or she believes.

Folks, I don't know about you, but for me, that's a message worth proclaiming and that's an identity I want to hold strongly to even if they're coming from a different religious perspective.

Our job here is to draw the circle wide. As wide as we can.

Are you with me? Can I get an amen?

Amen.