

“Hit Send”

Text: Acts 2:43-47; Matthew 28:16-20

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*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father
and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...Matthew 28:19*

There are two reasons why I am not yet a blogger. First, I do not feel deprived of adequate communication outlets and inputs. In fact, sometimes I feel over-blessed in those departments. The second reason I don't blog is that I tried one time and failed miserably. A preaching resource journal that I subscribe to had asked me to share my sermon ideas for Christ the King Sunday on their popular blog space which is used mainly by preachers who are pulling their hair out on Friday and Saturday because, so far, they don't have anything to say on Sunday.

I worked all one morning on my blog submission. Reluctantly I tore myself away around the middle of the day for a doctor's appointment. After that, and after eating lunch, I returned to the computer and slaved away for another couple hours. The deadline was 5:00. At 4:58, I hit "send". Instantly, everything I had worked on vanished from the screen. No, it had not reached its destination. It had simply disappeared into cyberspace. In its place were the words, "User not valid." In distress, I called the editor of the journal and told him what had happened. He said, "Oh, well, I guess you timed out."

"I didn't know you could time out!"

"Well of course you can," he said.

"NOW you tell me," I said to him, perhaps not using the manners my mother taught me in that particular phone conversation.

In the closing verses of Matthew's gospel, Jesus, using his authority as the risen Christ, hits "send," and the timeless message of the gospel goes forth into the world he came to save. He hit "send," thereby commissioning his disciples to go and "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, of the Son and of Holy Spirit." (Matthew 28:19)

In the gospel of John, the risen Christ hits “send”. He appears to his disciples in a locked room where they have hidden themselves away in terror. He says to them, “As the Father sent me, so I send you.” (John 20:12)

Imagine what would have happened if the disciples had not done what Jesus had instructed them to do and had empowered them to do with his authority and assurance that he would be with them always, and with their descendants always, to the end of the age? There would have been no telling of the good news. There would be no church, whose primary responsibility is to “proclaim the gospel for the salvation of humankind.” That is the first of the Six Great Ends of the Presbyterian Church: “the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind.” This mission, this mandate never times out. It is as much our privilege and our responsibility to proclaim the gospel as it was the responsibility of James and John, of Peter and of Andrew.

In the presidential race in recent weeks, there has been a great deal of talk about change. Change. Change. Change. Our society needs change; both parties are talking about change. I came across something that President Jimmy Carter said in his inaugural address, quoting his high school teacher, Miss Julia Coleman: “We must adjust to changing times and still hold to unchanging principles.” Certainly, that is what the church must do. We must know and be involved in our changing world, while presenting the message of hope and reconciliation that never times out. Our charge is to show forth Christ, the Lord of History, to all who will receive him.

Why? Because he asks us to.

Why? Because God loves the world.

Why? Because when you have good news that transforms your life, why in the world would you want to keep it to yourself? The world is starving for good news. Our society is starving for an alternative set of truths to the half-truths that are presented as whole truth.

Since you already know I can't blog, I'll confess something else. I don't know how to text message. My husband does, but I just don't trust my thumbs to say what I want to say. But I trust to the core of my being the message of the Biblical text: the good news of Jesus Christ and of his kingdom present here and now, whenever people are kind to one another, wherever the spirit of reconciliation, rather than division, reigns. I trust the text, not because it tells stories of events that happened long ago, but because it tells of a present tense Christ in a present tense world. The story invites us to re-imagine who we are now and what the world ought to be now, in light of the story that the Bible tells. (1)

I once heard a grandfather recount a conversation he had had with his six year old grandson, just before bedtime. “Tell me a story,” the boy said.

“What kind of story would you like to hear?”

“One with me in it.”

Walter Brueggemann suggests that is exactly what the contemporary church needs to do, and “what Christians and Jews have always done – Tell ‘the old, old story,’ but tell it in a way that impacts every aspect of contemporary life, both public and personal.” These stories, this message, this gospel are the vehicles by which all things are made new, including you and me. Imagine yourself - imagine our world made new. (2)

I’ve avoided a particular word as long as I can today. The time has come for me to say it out loud, from the pulpit. It’s a ten letter word. Most people dare not utter it in polite company, or in progressive churches. Before I say it, I will tell you about a teacher who told her students on the first day of school, “There are two words I will not allow in my classroom. One is ‘gross’ and the other is ‘cool’.”

A kid raised his hand, “So what are the two words?”

Have you guessed what is the “gross” and “un-cool” word in most Presbyterian churches? It starts with an “e”. Evangelism. Did you hear the groan? I heard it. The original meaning is actually quite gladsome. It comes from the same root as the word “angel”. It means sharing the message of the good news, bearing a message of hope in a world of despair, a promise of light where shadows loom. Certainly preaching and teaching are primary means of evangelism, but I have always been drawn to the wise words offered by St. Francis of Assisi, “Preach the gospel at all times. Use words if you have to.”

I am reminded of something Mahatmas Ghandi said when asked if he’d ever considered becoming a Christian, “I would have become a Christian were it not for all the Christians I have known.” Arrogance, mean spiritedness, the demeaning of others, manipulation, the Crusades, all these things done in the name of evangelism come to mind. I am particularly concerned about some modern day evangelists who try to bully people into believing, frightening them with threats of eternal damnation if they do not repent and/or send in money.

A friend of mine who teaches at Union Seminary tells of a preacher who was in the middle of a hellfire and damnation sermon when he noticed that a fellow was asleep on the front row. It infuriated the preacher. He walked down out of the pulpit and went right to the guy and said in his face, “Didn’t you hear me say that every single member of his congregation was going to hell that didn’t come forward this morning and be born again?”

“Yes, I did, but I’m not a member of this church.”

I don't care whether Morningside Presbyterian Church uses the word "evangelism," but I passionately believe we must be engaged in the work of evangelism, not in the sense of "a program strategy but in the sense of a revolutionary way of enacting the hope and energy" that come to us from God.(3) Why would we have this wonderful transformative story to tell and yet think it's right to keep it to ourselves? If the church is to be the place-keeper for the ways of God until the end of time, then here and now, we are the ones who are to bear witness to God's will and purpose. In word and deed, we tell the story of God's saving love in Christ Jesus.

I remember one occasion when I was a little timid about telling the story. I'd only been ordained a short time, when I had the privilege of preaching for a Lenten service at Ebenezer Baptist Church, the Church that was the spiritual home of Martin Luther King, Jr. and his family. I got through the sermon all right and was relieved it was over. We were singing the closing hymn and at the last verse, when Joe Roberts, the pastor, leaned over to me and said, "Joanna, I want you to open the doors of the church."

I looked at the back of the sanctuary, and the doors were standing wide open.

I said, "Joe, the doors are open."

He said, "That's not what I mean. I want you to give the invitation to come to Christ." The organist started playing.

I went to the pulpit. I did my Presbyterian best. No one came forward that night, but I was reminded of how the church exists to invite people in. The church exists to go out into the world with the message - to embody the message.

At a church officers' retreat in a congregation I served some years ago, an elder wearing a red flannel shirt and sitting by the fireplace announced that he thought our church had enough members and wondered what we could do to make sure that no one else came. I responded by asking what might have happened to him and his family when they had first visited that congregation. What would have happened to his daughters, to his whole family, if they had been told a membership cap was in place? What if those early Christian communities we hear about in Acts had turned away the many people the Lord wanted to add to their number? Of course there was not room for anybody else. Of course the resources were inadequate, but they figured out what to do; they shared everything. They were rich in hospitality and in the capacity to give, and there was always room at the table for one more or ten more. It didn't matter. What mattered was the new way of life made possible through Christ. Do you know what the first Christian creed was? "Kurios Iesous," "Jesus is Lord." Not "Kurios Kaisar," "Caesar is Lord," but "Kurios Iesous," "Jesus is Lord." (4)

Does our world today not need to hear an alternative message to the message that money is lord, that materialism is lord, that the American Empire has been destined by God to rule over all? Who is going to invite people to leave behind the old world of false truths and to step into the story that is everlasting, where the operative principle is divine grace, both saving and amazing.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel.” Neither should we be. Of course, we ought to respect other religions. Of course we ought to assume that God is working in other religions, but we should never be ashamed or timid about the gospel itself. We should be ashamed of how it’s been applied and misused, but never ashamed of the gospel itself. (5)

I remember reading about a newly minted minister who ended his first sermon by saying, “But then again, what do I know?” We need to be convicted about the lordship of Christ. Our hope lies in the promise that of his kingdom, there will be no end, but we should never be arrogant about it. God loves all people. God is free to work through philosophers and through the arts. God is free to work through secular organizations that relieve human suffering and work for justice. And we are free as well, to do our job, which is to be about the business of bearing witness to God’s healing work and presence in the world.

Today we will commission new elders and deacons, and I hope when we do, you will feel God’s hand on your shoulder, commissioning you to live a committed life, to go and love and tell and follow Christ wherever you go, whatever you do. I love what D. T. Niles once said of evangelism, “It is just one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.”

It is said that when Jesus arrived in heaven, after his ascension, he hurried to God to report on his adventures on earth. All the angels and the archangels gathered around and listened intently. When Jesus got to the part about entrusting the spreading of the good news to his followers, one of the angels asked in horror, “Oh Jesus, what if they fail?”

Jesus answered, “I have no other plan.”

(1) Walter Bruggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism*, Abingdon Press, 1993, p. 8.

(2) Ibid.

(3) Ibid., p.13.

(4) Fleming Rutledge, “Not Ashamed of the Gospel,” *Cathedral Age*, Summer, 2006, p.6-9.

(5) Ibid.