

## **Evangelism is about more than more members**

The Rev. Mark D. Wilkinson, Rector

St. Aidan's Episcopal Church

July 3, 2016

It is not very often that a vestry meeting can fit as the topic of a sermon because the gospel for the week is one of the things we were actually looking at. Today's gospel shows Jesus preparing to send out his first evangelism teams and that was one of the things we discussed on Tuesday.

One of the things a vestry is expected to do every year is called a Mutual Ministry Review. Some years like last year we invited someone from outside the parish to come and facilitate the discussion. Segar Gravit was the person we used last year. She knows our parish history but has not had a lot of direct contact recently. This is sort of an annual checkup and a how are we doing discussion. This past Tuesday we did an internal review and used the report of the Commission that wrote our Mission and Vision Statement as the tool.

We looked at what the issues were back in 2012, what issues are the same, what had changed and what new challenges and opportunities do we face. Part of this is a SWOT analysis, Internal Strengths and weaknesses and external opportunities in threats. Now Jesus and the 70 certainly didn't do any of this type of work but it was interesting. Jesus had done some of this analysis when he sent the 70 out. He knew the challenges they faced, the opportunities before them and he knew what he had taught them in preparation.

One of the areas we decided that we have made progress but still have work to do is the area of evangelism and that is exactly what today's gospel passage is about. Now evangelism is more than putting people in pews. If we go out to invite people with the primary purpose of gaining members and building our budget we will fail. Today's unchurched person can smell that a mile away.

The word comes from the Greek word εὐαγγέλιον, (evangelion) which means good news. An evangelist is someone who actively shares the good news of Christ. It really is that simple. I'm an evangelist and everyone of you can and should be one to. In fact Christ calls all of us to be evangelists. When you share your story about your faith you are an evangelist. It is the Good News that ultimately attracts people.

What a challenge those 70 must have faced. Just imagine how the 70 felt when Jesus sent them out to non-Jews with no bag, food or supplies and said, go prepare the way for me. Our challenge is even greater today in some respects. Did you know the average member of a mainline church invites a person to come to church once every 17 years. And we wonder why we have empty pews.

We are back in the world of the early church. Using the information provided by Percept, the national church database we know that our neighborhood on the whole is considered very low in the category of religiosity. This is the most significant change in the last 4 years for that is a marked decrease. Jesus was sending his disciples out into a world where many had not even heard of Jesus and many might be actually hostile to the message so the parallels are there..

When we speak of growing the church, growing our parish we are talking about Evangelism, nothing more nothing less. Why does this word continue to make us nervous? Why do we hesitate with this word?

This is because we often associate the word with those in your face usually conservative people my way is the only way at best and the nut case standing on the corner of the public square at worst. That is how some have hi-jacked the word, but this is not what the original concept was. I ran into one of those on the golf course one Monday. There was a twosome behind us that we let play through on a par 3. This one guy gets up to the green and says, "Are you boys Christian?" Then he goes on to tell us about a ministry he is doing for homeless where they are building a shelter and offering training, which is great. But then he says, I'm looking for teams of men to come and teach these poor folks about Jesus and to save them. In other words you get a place to stay and food, but you must listen to someone cram Jesus down your throat to stay. This is not evangelism as I preach it. It is also not what Jesus expected when he sent out the 70 in today's gospel.

Jesus sent the disciples out to offer the good news. If it was accepted, then they were to stay. If they were rejected, then shake the dust off their feet and move on to the next place.

There are times when we all have an opportunity to evangelize. I had one just last week. Monica Flynn invited me to give an invocation at a diversity training day for the employees of NEX (run commissaries all over the place). Now I did not realize they are headquartered within walking distance of our parish. They were doing a diversity program on LGBT issues for Pride month and wanted a religious type of some sort to give the opening prayer. It had to be ecumenical and welcoming of all religious traditions. Now everyone there knew I was an Episcopal priest because they were told who I was and that I was the rector of St. Aidan's. There was a panel with a couple of gay men and one transgender woman. The moderator was a straight attorney who specialized in LGBT legal issues. It was a fascinating discussion

So I wrote a prayer that spoke not just of support for LGBT community but of a world where all are created in God's image and loved as children of God. One of the panel members who worked for NEX said that he was grateful for the support and welcome of parishes like St. Aidan's and mentioned the interfaith gathering I was at during PRIDE week at the beginning of the month.

When the program was done one the panelists came over and we talked and he said, "You know my husband and I live just around the corner from St. Aidan's and we have a son. I'd like him to experience God as you seem to preach him. I look forward to visiting." Then another woman came down and said, "I emailed you awhile back about visiting and we just never got around to coming. I'm so tired of the tiny God my children are being taught about at the Baptist church we go to. I grew up in the Episcopal Church and I want my children to learn about God there. I'll see you one Sunday soon."

By the way I'm willing to bet there were a number of people in that audience who had no idea what the Episcopal Church is. Wendy encounters many blank stares at ODU when speaking with students. They know she is some sort of religious person because of her collar, but she is really in the world of the 70 that Jesus sent out. The only difference is she has two cute dogs that accompany her and the kids start with the dogs first. Otherwise I doubt they would talk to her. Incidentally one of her leaders and the young lady dog sitting for us while we are gone joined following just a simple encounter on campus.

What both these examples get to is something that Aidan understood. Aidan like Jesus practiced a gentle evangelism. He didn't demand that people immediately accept Jesus before entering the door. He invited them in to experience his community. Aidan planted not just churches but communities in fact he established monasteries that became community centers where people gathered for many things not just church. He offered the gospel in many loving ways and that's what we have to offer here.

People today do desire an encounter with the holy. So many say they are spiritual but not religious because religion carries such negative baggage today. We are in the early church and we face huge challenges in inviting people. We have several great opportunities coming up and the biggest one is Vacation Bible School. Don't leave that yellow insert in the bulletin today. Take it home and give it to somebody. As we get closer to September I'm going to have those little business cards available again. Keep a couple in your wallet or purse and hand it to someone and invite them to check us out. Speak when the opportunity presents itself.

Kevin Hackett a brother at SSJE said this, "Mission is primarily about making the presence of God incarnate, that is, visible and tangible, in a particular place and a particular time, where ever "the Body is lacking"—and therefore most needed."

I'm not asking you to go out in the wilderness without a bag. I'm not sending you out as a sheep among wolves. I'm asking you to make God Incarnate, visible

tangible in our community. What I am asking you is go, spread the news and invite people to experience God here at St. Aidan's, whenever you have the chance.