

Why Be Christian?

A Sermon Preached at Hanover St. Presbyterian Church

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Texts:

Philippians 3: 4-14

Colossians 2: 1-5

John 1: 9-18

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The next issue of the Hanover Herald will be arriving soon in your mail box. I invite you to read there a brief article I wrote entitled, "Removing the Tarnish from 'Evangelism.'" "I didn't know it was tarnished," you may say. Perhaps in your eyes it isn't, but since my arrival at Hanover I have noticed that quite a number of Hanover members are uneasy about the "e word." Some Christians are coming to associate evangelism with dogmatism, narrow mindedness, and ignorance. This morning I want to begin removing the tarnish from "evangelism," that word that derives from the Greek one, meaning "good news".

The earliest Christians heralded the story of Jesus—his teachings and miraculous healings, his self-emptying death and his resurrection-- as incomparably good news, life saving news. Later, many endured imprisonment and faced execution because they would not keep this good news to themselves. Later, Christians crossed terrifying oceans to carry the good news to far away places. From very early on Christianity has been an evangelical faith, meaning that its adherents have been zealous to make disciples, or "fish for people" as our scriptures say.

We who cherish Jesus and call him Lord may overlook that the phrase, "fish for people," can have a predatory ring. The down side of Christian missionary zeal is that it did not always reflect the love that was in Jesus, but in some instances became imperious and coercive. If you have read James Michener's historical novel, *Hawaii*, you may have found yourself, like I, rooting for the Hawaiians who struggled against the Christian missionaries to preserve the beauty and truth of their own ways. The missionaries in that book come across as shallow minded, and arrogant. Last week the presbyters of Beaver Butler Presbytery in Western Pennsylvania issued a confession of faith that sounds to my ears also shallow minded and arrogant. "We profess and believe," they write, "that one cannot have a relationship with God outside of Jesus. . . We profess and believe that one cannot be a Minister of the Word and Sacrament, Elder or Deacon and believe that there are other ways to God, other ways to salvation, outside of Jesus."

If this confession be an example of authentic evangelical faith, than I want no part of evangelism. Even the very first Christian missionary, an evangelical par excellence, the Apostle Paul, exhibited a broader minded faith than this, for he declared to the philosophers in the market place that they already had some knowledge of the great God whom he worshipped, though they knew not how to name that God; and he admitted that the Jewish people, though resisting the Christian gospel, were still God's chosen people. Unless one keeps spiritual blinders on, who can live in a metropolis today, working alongside people of other faiths, perhaps even inter-marrying with them, while insisting that they have no access to God, and exude no holy spirit? To persist in beating the dogmatic drum that Jesus is the only way to God flies in the face of our experience and blares out as paranoiac fanaticism.

Beating dogmatic drums has given evangelism a bad name. Put off by this ignorance and arrogance, some people have abandoned their Christian faith altogether. Others have accepted an unspoken assumption of societies growing more and more diverse, namely, that religious faith is a private concern which one ought to keep to oneself if one is to be tolerant and civil. Consequently, the only Christianity many people hear about these days is the exclusivist variety preached by fundamentalists who have stolen and sullied the word, "evangelical," whilst more open minded Christians, not wanting to be associated with them and not knowing exactly how to articulate another form of Christian faith, keep silent.

It is time, Hanover, to take back the e-word. It is time to take the tarnish off of "evangelism" so that we can share our faith in good conscience, with sensitivity and respect for persons of other faiths. If the Great Commission of scripture, to go forth and make disciples of all nations, is not about converting, for example, Jews and Moslems and Buddhists to our way, then what is it about? We have inherited a centuries-long tradition of sharing our faith. Our forebears considered the gospel good news for all people. What does this tradition mean in the context of religious pluralism?) If Jesus is not the only way to God, then why be Christian? What is the point of preaching about Jesus if one honors other ways?

That question seems so crucial, so decisive for determining who we are as Christians, because historically we have tended to operate under the assumption that there is only one valid way to God, namely the Christian one. For some Christians, renouncing that claim may seem a slippery slope toward no faith in Jesus whatsoever. However, renouncing exclusive claims to salvation or access to God appears perilous only because one assumes at the outset that there is but one way to God. This assumption was incubated in early Christianity when Christians (largely Jewish followers of Jesus then) were defending themselves against other Jews who could no longer tolerate their interpretation of Hebrew scriptures. The statement in John's gospel, "I am the way and the truth and the life; no one comes to the father but by me," can be read as the church's self defense against its Jewish detractors. It is a cruel mistake to let that passage grow

legs and walk about out of context so that it derogates any experience of God save the Christian one.

I return to the question of my sermon's title: Why be Christian? If the answer is not: because if you're not Christian you'll burn in hell, then what is the answer? When we lived in Christendom, the word "Christian" was often used synonymously with "a person of good character." In Christendom, most people took it for granted that Christianity under girded virtue. So, why be Christian then? Why, to be a good person, of course. However, this answer worked only for people who were living in a cultural cocoon. Such an answer won't wash in today's diverse societies. Christianity is patently not the only way to a morally decent life. There are other good paths to follow. Why be Christian, then, if not to be good?

Before answering the question, let me say that in the spirit of all I have said up to this point, my answer is not the answer. My experience of the preciousness of my faith in Jesus may well differ from yours. I shall not try to make a definitive statement about the essence of Christian faith, but rather, speak about my own experience.

To one degree I am Christian because my family taught me about Jesus, taught me that he was God's special child, that in some mysterious way he gave his life for me, and that he is living still, available to me, if only I reach out. I believed that, because I was taught it. But neither the belief alone, nor declaring the belief made me a Christian. I was standing in Christian traditions then, but I had not experienced the presence of Christ. Once I had, it hardly made sense to ask why I should be a Christian, a follower of the risen One. When one is in love, does one ask why one should be so? One just is, for one has come into contact with another person whose presence is overwhelmingly compelling, and whose companionship needs no justification. After my spiritual awakening in Vietnam, I was in love you see, with this benignly haunting personal presence. Why be Christian? Because Jesus came to me, and called me, that's why. I have read that the personal nature of the divine is portrayed in some other religious traditions, in Hinduism most notably. But I do not need to profess that Jesus is the only divine way in order, as Paul wrote, to cherish his love more than anything else in the world. In today's epistle reading Paul says: I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. Why be Christian? There you have Paul's answer, and mine too: Because we have come to know Jesus. John writes: "No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known." Do you hear the personal nature of John's message? Jesus has made God visible for us. Are there other ways to God? Of course. But Jesus helps me to see God better than any other way I know. As I considered how I would answer the question I raised in this sermon, I recalled several hymns that are woven into the fabric of my faith, and I realized how they all express a personal quality of the faith we share: "Precious Lord Take My Hand", "Jesus Loves Me", "Jesus Lover of My Soul", "Blessed Assurance Jesus is Mine", "I Want Jesus to Walk With Me", "Jesus Priceless Treasure", "Jesus Thou Joy of Loving Hearts", "What a Friend We Have

in Jesus”, and so on. All of these hymns speak about believers’ experience of the presence of God in the person of Jesus. Why be Christian? Because we are persons, mortal, vulnerable, and dependent, and in Jesus we meet God in a very personal way, so that God comes within our reach. We become the Adam in Michael Angelo’s Sistine Chapel painting, reaching out to touch God Almighty, and in Jesus we can, because he is a person, like us. That is wonderful good news. I can share that with anybody, gladly, unashamedly. For me, that lays the foundation for an evangelism without tarnish.