

Rev. Dr. Claude I. Dencler Sermon 01-10-10 “Go, Sit and Tell” Acts 8: 26-37

One Sunday, back before Christmas, Donna and I ran down to Wal-Mart, right after church, to pick something up. I was waiting in a line to speak to a very busy customer service representative.

Finally, when it was my turn, he asked what I needed and began to help. But then, as he was working to get me what I was looking for, he suddenly asked, “Where do you go to church?”

“The UCC of Hummelstown. How did you know I go to church?” The coat and tie, he replied. Then he looked at me, with a look that had a sense of urgency and said: “Jesus saved my life! And then he told me his story.

This morning, I want to talk with you about Evangelism. I want to talk with you about sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ. And I’m willing to bet that if I gave you the option right now, a lot of folks would like to get up and leave.

You see, most of us don’t get too excited about the word Evangelism. It’s a word that either makes us feel quality...because we’re not doing very much of it ourselves. Or, it turns us off, because there’s no way we would even want to DO, what we’ve come to believe evangelism is about.

Not too long ago, there was a study done of churches like ours --churches that have been around for hundreds of years. Researchers call us “The Old Mainline.” We’re Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Reformed UCC, and more. And one of the things that came out of that study was the fact that most of us would rather go get a root canal than talk about, much less DO evangelism.

For the last several decades, churches like ours have been in regular and steady decline. So that we churches, now find ourselves in a precarious place, complicated by our life-threatening aversion to evangelism.

And so it is....I think....that we need to take another look at evangelism. And so it is...I think... that we need to consider anew, what God’s gift of evangelism is really all about. The Bible lesson given to us for our consideration today, presents the story of a man who needs to hear some words about God’s love.

Without going into a lot of historical and cultural background, let me just say that the Ethiopian eunuch was someone who bore deep wounds inflicted by the world...was not welcomed by traditional religion...looked, on the surface, to be successful in life, but felt empty. He was someone searching for something besides what he had -- someone who needed to hear about God's love.

And those kinds of people still exist today. As a matter of fact, those kinds of people live right here in Hummelstown. They work where you work. They go to school where you go to school. They belong to the organizations you belong to. Their kids play with your kids. They might even be in your own family.

When I was a kid growing up in Baltimore, back in the 1950s and early 60s, almost everyone in my neighborhood went to church. The Kramers across the street went to the Methodist church. The Deitzes, next to them, went to the Baptist church. The Bonds and the Jensens went to the Lutheran church that we attended. The Seabreezes and Walshes were Roman Catholic...and so on around the block.

Today, not too many folks go to church any more. Why, in our zip code area, the latest demographic study shows that some 35% of our neighbors have no religious identity at all. They're not Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist or Christian. They're not connected to any religion.

In 1910 (100 years ago), only 3% of the people in the US had no faith training. Today, in 2010 over 35% have no religious faith training. And that number is growing rapidly.

"Why can't I be baptized?" the Ethiopian asked Philip. The answer....to his question was simply, because.... no one had ever told him he could be. No one had ever presented that as an option...as a possibility. No one had ever shared their faith with him, or told him about the love of God.

And I guess I just can't help but wonder, what blocks us from sharing our faith... what stops us from telling others about the love of God?

This Lent, I want to invite you to be part of a great spiritual adventure. When Lent 2010 begins in February, I want to challenge you to commit yourself to 40 days of consistent, disciplined prayer, to growing in your faith and in your ability to share that faith, and to being part of a unifying community experience.

Together, as a church community we will read, during Lent, a short book, Unbinding Your Heart. It was written as a result of the study of old mainline churches that I mentioned at the beginning of my message.

In your bulletin today, there's a sheet of paper that invites you to state your desire to go on this adventure, this Lenten Journey. Go ahead and pull that piece of paper out from your bulletin. Hold it in your hand. What you're holding, is an opportunity to join in a journey on which you will be spiritually encouraged and intellectually stimulated.

By signing that piece of paper you will be saying that you will seriously consider and pray about stepping out on that journey. You will be saying that you are open to inviting God to help you grow in our faith. And to help you move toward the place where you are more comfortable, more ready to respond, when you encounter someone who needs to hear..... about the love of God.

A friend shared a story with me that I like to pass along to you, as a way of ending my message for today. It was the last Christmas they spent at their grandparent's house. The grandfather had Parkinson's disease. It had been the long-standing family tradition for everyone to gather around the Christmas tree and listen as the grandfather read the Christmas story from St Luke.

This Christmas, the grandfather tried to read, but he could barely move his Parkinson's- locked jaw. He just couldn't get the words to come out. The family sat there and watched as he struggled. No one seemed to know what to do. Should they say something? Would it hurt his pride if someone helped him?

So everyone sat in silence...for what seemed to be an eternity. And then little Emily, his 6 year old granddaughter, who was just learning how to read, slipped quietly out of her seat, and crawled up next to her grandfather.

And taking his finger in her little hand, she helped him point to each word, saying them out loud with him....as they read together:

“Unto you is born this day, a savior, which is Christ the Lord.”

“Do you know what you’re reading?” Phillip asked the Ethiopian. And the man, almost pleading, said: “How can I, unless someone helps me?” And so Phillip went and sat beside him.

Who does God want you to go and sit beside?

Sign this little piece of paper. Tell God you want to be better prepared to share the Good News of God’s love when you are called to go, sit and tell.

(I am indebted to the *Unbinding Your Church* sermon series for the basic outline of this message and particularly to Dawn Darwin Weeks for the closing story.)

