

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, October 26, 2008**

AN EVANGELISTIC LIFE?

Matthew 9:35-38

Do you know the story of the young monk who was given the assignment of giving the sermon at the monastery's chapel service the next morning? He had never done it before, and he was terrified. When the time came the next morning, he stepped into the pulpit, his knees shaking and his voice quivering. There was a long pause as he looked out at all the brothers gathered there. Finally he spoke, and asked this question: "Do you know what I'm going to say?"

The assembled monks had no idea, so they all shook their heads back and forth, almost in unison, as if it had been choreographed. Then the young monk said: "Neither do I. Let's stand for the benediction."

The head of the monastery was not pleased. He called the young monk in and said: "What was that? You will be the preacher again tomorrow, and this time I expect you to preach."

But the next day was almost an exact repeat of the day before. As he stood before the other monks, his hands shook. His knees knocked. His lips trembled. After a long pause, he finally said: "Do you know what I'm going to say?"

After the previous day's experience, the assembled monks had a pretty good idea. So they all nodded their heads yes. "Then there is no need for me to tell you," he said. "Let's stand for the benediction."

The head of the monastery was furious. He was livid. He brought the young man into his office and said: "If you do that again, you're going to be in solitary confinement with nothing but bread and water for 30 days, and any other punishment I can think of. Tomorrow morning, give the sermon! And do it right!"

The next day, chapel attendance hit an all-time high. Everyone was there to see what this young monk would say. And it was almost an exact repeat. Almost. He stood there, trembling, and after a long silence, he said: "Do you know what I'm going to say?"

After three days of this, about half of the monks thought they had a pretty good idea, so they nodded their heads yes. The other half, having noticed the change from the first day to the second, weren't quite sure what to expect, so they shook their heads no.

So the monk simply said: "Let those who know tell those who don't. Let's stand for the benediction."

Not exactly what the head of the monastery had in mind. But not a bad sermon, if you think about it. When it comes to the message of the gospel, the message of God's saving love for us in His Son Jesus Christ, the message of reconciliation He has entrusted to His church, what does God want us to do? He wants those of us who know – those of us who know Christ in the power of His saving love – to tell those who don't.

This is not rocket science. It is a basic principle of the Christian life. It is an essential aspect of our "Great Commission." But a lot of us struggle with it. We struggle with knowing how to do it effectively. We struggle with actually doing it, for a whole host of reasons. Just so you know, it is something I struggle with, too.

There is a little known verse tucked away in Paul's letter to Philemon in the New Testament where Paul says to Philemon: "I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ" (Philemon 6). There is a double benefit from sharing our faith with others. Those with whom we share our faith are blessed. Some, perhaps even many, with whom we share our faith will embrace the faith and come to know Christ in a personal way as Savior and Lord of their lives. And, says Paul, through the act of sharing our faith, we ourselves will come to a greater understanding of all the benefits and blessings that are ours in Christ. Others will be blessed through our witness. And so will we.

You may know that the Session met for a mini-retreat earlier this month and identified three priorities for the ministry of our church in 2009. In addition to our ongoing commitment to support the establishment of our daughter church, Redeemer, as a full-fledged "particular church" in the EPC reaching out to people in the Lorton and Woodbridge communities with the message of the gospel, and in addition to our commitment to the development of ministries to children and their families, the Session identified these three priorities for our life and ministry together here at Faith:

- 1) To equip and inspire every member of Faith and Redeemer to live an evangelistic life.
- 2) To equip and inspire every member of Faith and Redeemer to minister to and disciple one another.
- 3) To care for the poor and hurting in the church and the world.

I hope you will agree that these are biblical priorities. I hope you will agree that they are consistent with our church's mission. I hope you will agree that they express what the Head of the church desires for us as His people. I hope you will agree that these priorities reflect God's will for our lives and for our life as a fellowship of believers where Jesus is Lord and everybody counts.

Over the next few weeks, I want to think with you about these three priorities, their meaning and application in our lives. Today let's look at the first: To equip and inspire every member of Faith to live an evangelistic life.

AN EVANGELISTIC HEART

An evangelistic life? What does that mean? To some people (perhaps some of us) even the notion is intimidating. The word “evangelism” is a loaded word today. It is a word that frightens some people and offends others. It is a word that may make us feel guilty or inadequate. Or it may conjure up images in our mind of evangelistic styles or efforts that we find distasteful or self-defeating.

You probably know that the word “evangelism” comes from the Greek word *evangelion*, which simply means “good news.” Evangelism is simply sharing the evangel, the good news of God’s redeeming love in His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Charles Spurgeon, among others, defined evangelism as “one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.” We’re all beggars, destitute apart from God’s grace. And those of us who have experienced God’s saving grace in Jesus – who said “I am the bread of life” (John 6:35) – have the privilege and the mission in life of telling others where to find this bread. To put it another way, those who know are to tell those who don’t.

But what does it mean, in practical terms, to live an evangelistic life? Does it mean going out and preaching on a street corner every Friday night? Probably not, unless that is what God calls you to do. Does it mean going door to door in your neighborhood (or some other neighborhood) handing out gospel tracts? Again, probably not, unless that is something God directs you to do. Does it mean provoking an argument with an unbeliever in an attempt to persuade him of the truth of Christianity? Probably not, since very few people are argued into the kingdom of God.

I’m not going to focus on particular methods of sharing our faith today. Instead, I want you to think with me about certain qualities of an evangelistic life. I believe an evangelistic life is not simply about what we do, though we cannot live an evangelistic life if we don’t do anything to share our faith. An evangelistic life is rooted not merely in what we do but in what we are. To say it another way, an evangelistic life flows out of an evangelistic heart. Proverbs 4:23 says that the heart is “the wellspring of life.” Jesus says in Matthew 12:34: “Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.” If you and I want to live an evangelistic life – and I do, because I believe it is God’s will for my life – then we must cultivate an evangelistic heart.

What does an evangelistic heart look like? Let me suggest three characteristics.

1. A HEART FOR GOD

An evangelistic heart, first of all, is a heart for God. It is a heart that loves God and is passionately committed to living for God and His glory. It is a heart that desires to live all of life *coram deo* – that is, before the face of God (recognizing and rejoicing in His presence), under His sovereign and gracious rule (for He is both sovereign over all things and gracious in His dealings with us), and unto His glory (since everything got started in Him and finds its purpose in Him).

Before the face of God. Under His sovereign and gracious rule. And unto His glory.

A heart for God is a heart that has been transformed – and is being transformed – by the power of His love.

It is a heart that recognizes that “it’s not about us.”

There are a lot of things that are important in life. But those who have a heart for God understand that it is ultimately not about who wins the election on November 4.

It is not about which party controls Congress or who occupies the White House, as important as that may seem.

It is not about who wins the World Series or who is #1 in the college football polls.

It is not about the ups and downs of the stock market or all the turbulence in the economy.

It is not about winning arguments with people who disagree with us.

It is not about being liked by other people, or receiving the kudos we think we deserve.

It is not about us. It is about God and His glory.

An evangelistic heart is first of all a heart for God. It is a heart that values the things God values. A heart that breaks for the things that break the heart of God. A heart that takes pleasure in the things that bring pleasure to God.

Do you have a heart for God? I know that I don’t always have a heart for God. A lot of times I have a heart for Neil. I’m more interested in what Neil wants than I am in what God wants. I’m more interested in what makes Neil happy than I am in what is pleasing to God. But I want more and more to have a heart for God. How about you? If you’re like me and you have not yet arrived at the place where your heart is fully devoted to the Lord, we can pray for one another that God will purify and chisel and mold and shape our hearts to be like Him. So that we have a heart for God.

But I have to say this: If you are living a lie today, if you are pretending to be something you’re not, if you are one person when you’re in public and another person in private, if you are tolerating or rationalizing some sin in your life – even if nobody knows about it, you need to get right with God. You need to renounce your sin and start fresh with God. And there is no better time than today to do it.

2. A HEART FOR PEOPLE

In addition to a heart for God, we need to cultivate a heart for people if we are to live an evangelistic life.

What do I mean by a heart for people? I mean a heart of love and compassion for others. Just like Jesus. What do we see in our text today from Matthew 9? We see Jesus going through all the towns and villages of Galilee (9:35). Jesus didn't sit around waiting for people to come to Him. He took the initiative. He went where people were. He took the message of the gospel to the people. You probably know that there is nowhere in the Bible where it says we are to wait for the world to come to the church. This is one thing too many churches, and too many church people, have gotten wrong. Instead, the Bible tells us to take the gospel with us as we go out into the world. That is what Jesus did.

Our text in Matthew 9 also tells us that Jesus had a heart of compassion. Verse 36 says: "When (Jesus) saw the crowds, He had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."

Jesus was motivated by a heart of compassion and love. That same kind of love and compassion are to stir our hearts and spur us into action.

The word "compassion" literally means "to suffer with." It is about sharing in the anguish or sorrow or distress or misfortune of another. And it is what we see incarnated in the life of Jesus as He continually entered into the pain, the grief, the hunger, the confusion and distress in people's lives.

It says in verse 36 that Jesus saw the crowd. But I think He didn't just see a crowd. I think He saw individuals – men, women and children. I think He saw real people, one by one, who matter to God. People God loves. And His heart went out to them, one by one.

Nobody is a nobody in God's eyes. Please don't ever forget that. Nobody is a nobody in the eyes of God.

Jesus' heart went out to the crowd, because He understood that they were like sheep who desperately need a shepherd to save them, to lead them and protect them. He saw people who were spiritually lost and dying without Him.

What do you think Jesus sees when He looks at the world today? Our world? He sees the same thing. He sees people who are lost. People who are going the wrong way in life. People who don't know which way to go or where to find what will really satisfy their souls.

There was a missionary who brought some Third World pastors to the U. S. for a big conference. While they were here, some of the pastors wanted to go shopping. Even though the conference was not in a big city, the missionary knew someone might have a problem or get lost. So the missionary gave this group of pastors her phone number in case of an emergency. Sure enough, in less than an hour, the phone rang. "I'm lost," said one of the pastors.

The missionary gave him these instructions: "Go to the street corner, find out the names of the two streets at the corner, then tell me and I will come and get you."

The pastor did as instructed. After looking at the signs at the corner, he said: “I am at the corner of ‘Walk’ and ‘Don’t Walk.’”

The world all around us is full of people who are standing at the corner of ‘Walk’ and ‘Don’t Walk,’ and they don’t know which way to go. Or they have made wrong choices and they have gone the wrong way.

When Jesus saw the crowds – when He saw the faces of the men, women and children who surrounded Him – He was moved to compassion for them. And the Lord wants us to do the same in Jesus’ name.

To live an evangelistic life we must cultivate an evangelistic heart. An evangelistic heart is a heart for people. A heart of loving compassion for people in every stage and station of life who are lost without Christ.

How is it in your life? Do you have a heart for people? A heart of compassion and love for the lost, the poor and needy that compels you to action in Jesus’ name?

Ask the Lord to fill you – to fill us – with the kind of loving compassion that will inspire us to meet people where they are (just like Jesus did) and to share with them the Savior’s love.

3. A HEART FOR PRAYER

A third characteristic of an evangelistic life is a heart for prayer. A couple weeks ago I quoted John Piper’s statement that “earnest, heartfelt prayer is the means by which we (hitch) ourselves to the locomotive of God’s power.” Prayer is intended by God to be a source of spiritual power. And God uses the prayers of people like us to fire up the engine of evangelism.

God uses prayer to bring about revival and spiritual awakenings. He has done so throughout history. God uses prayer to open doors of opportunity for witness. God uses prayer to open the hearts of men and women, girls and boys, who need the gospel. God uses prayer to change people. God uses prayer to change nations. God uses prayer to change circumstances. God uses prayer to change us.

Jesus said: “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into His harvest field” (Matthew 9:37-38).

To live an evangelistic life, you and I need to go deep and grow strong in the blessed discipline of prayer. How should we pray?

- We are to pray for an abundant harvest – a harvest of hearts and lives for the kingdom of God.
- We are to pray for the Lord to raise up and send out more workers into the harvest field.

- We can pray, too, for those who have already gone out and are serving God on the mission field. Our recently published 2008 Missions Prayer Guide provides information on all the various missionaries and ministries supported by our church. I encourage you to use it regularly to ask the Lord to bless them and their work.
- We can pray specifically for people we know who don't know Christ. Here is something I encourage you to do. I encourage you to take some time today, or sometime this week, and prayerfully make a list of, say, five people you know in your sphere of influence who don't know Christ. Then pray regularly – pray daily – for those individuals and their salvation. If you don't know five people who don't know Christ, ask the Lord to bring into your life individuals you can introduce to the Savior.
- As we go through each day, we can ask the Lord to give us openings to give a witness or to plant a seed of the gospel in someone's life.

What if God were to use each of us – each and every one of us, regardless of our age or position – to bring another person to faith in Christ in the next year? Each one of us. Wouldn't that be fantastic? Let's ask God to do it.

To live an evangelistic life, we need a heart for prayer since it is prayer that fires up the engine of evangelism.

Are you a prayer warrior? Is there an evangelistic focus and fervor in your prayers? If not, let this be the day you enlist in the army of God's prayer team.

A heart for God. A heart for people. A heart of compassion. And a heart for prayer. These are all characteristics of an evangelistic heart.

It takes much more than one sermon "to equip and inspire every member of Faith and Redeemer to live an evangelistic life." I know that. And I know you know it. I hope this message will help to inspire you. I hope that through it you will be encouraged and inspired in your life both to think and to live evangelistically. I hope you will be open and attentive to opportunities God places before you. I hope you will be obedient to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

And I pray that it will be so in my life, because I have a long way to go myself. So, if living an evangelistic life seems like a huge challenge for you, know that we're in it together.

Let's encourage one another, as Paul prayed for Philemon, to be active in sharing our faith, so that those who know will tell those who don't.

May it be so, to the glory and praise of God. Amen.

