



GOD'S SURPRISING EVANGELISM

January 12, 2020, First Sunday After Epiphany, Baptism of the Lord

Acts 10:34-48

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Will Willimon, a retired Methodist Bishop, recalls that one of the congregations he served decided they needed to grow. So, they voted to launch an evangelism program. Given our Scripture reading and Brick Church's new emphasis on evangelism, this a timely topic.

Admittedly, it's not a comfortable one for mainline denominations like Presbyterians and Methodists. 'Evangelism' and 'conversion' are words and practices we gladly ceded long ago to, well, evangelicals! It sounds too much like Bible thumping and door knocking, which make our Reformed knees knock instead.

Anyway, Willimon's church only turned to evangelism because they had to, which is often the inspiration for a church-growth strategy. His church leaders formed a committee, of course, which is proven recipe for stirring evangelical fervor, isn't it? They studied a denominational program that told them how to attract new members. It included door-to-door solicitation. They went out in groups of twos, each team with a map plotted out with houses to visit, inviting people to come their church. Armed with pamphlets and brochures sporting a glossy photo of their smiling pastor and describing their congregation, denominational beliefs, and their programs, they struck out uncomfortably but hopefully enough.

Willimon remembers that Helen and Gladys were given their map. "They were clearly told to go down Summit Drive and to *turn right*," Willimon recalled. "That's what they were told. I clearly heard the team leader tell them, 'You go down Summit Drive and turn right. Do you hear me, Helen? That's down Summit



Drive and turn right?” He spoke a little loudly because both Helen and Gladys were in their 80s and had grown a bit hard of hearing. But the team leader also knew they had been elementary school teachers and were much better at giving instruction than receiving it. Helen and Gladys went down Summit Drive but turned left instead of right. This put them going into “the wrong neighborhood” and thereby running the risk that they would evangelize “the wrong people.”ⁱ

And it is right at this point that we should all direct our attention back to the Scripture reading today from the Book of Acts, chapter 10. If you want to explore one of the most important astounding, history-turning events in the entire Bible, read Acts, chapters 10 and 11.

Our reading today begins with Peter making an astonishing statement, which he makes neither easily nor blithely. Instead, it has taken days of one mind-blowing revelation and act of God in his life after another for him to say: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” This from a member of the household of Israel. One of God’s chosen people in a special covenantal relationship God has established with them alone among all the nations. This faithful Jewish leader declares that God shows no partiality and accepts everyone who fears and follows him.

We have come to bandy about words like “inclusivity” and “equality” with such ubiquitous ease today that we gloss over the true complexity of living out their implications in our neighborhoods and churches and schools, and in our nation, let alone on a global scale. In the first century, prejudices and social distinctions, and racial divides, and economic disparities, and religious differences had real-life implications. Everything from where you lived and what job you could hold to the foods you could eat and the houses you would enter. Well...maybe things haven’t changed as much in 2,000 years as we like to think. We still hang out with “our own kind” more often than not only in our friendships but in our congregations.



Yet, the seeds of Peter's declaration that God shows no partiality were in him already, a gift of his Jewish faith. As far back as Deuteronomy 10:17, Israel declared: "...the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing..." But that was a statement about how to treat those who were dwelling within Israel. Here, in Acts 10:34 and in other early Christian literature, impartiality becomes a fundamental theological claim. It is the claim that in Christ, all distinctions, Jew/Greek, slave/free, male/female have been abolished because we are made one on Christ.

All through Acts 10 and 11, God has been preparing Peter and the early church for something they had not seen coming at all. God brings Peter, the Jewish follower of Jesus, into direct contact and then relationship with Cornelius, a Gentile army commander for the pagan emperor. Both men are converted. That's when Peter utters this 'no partiality' declaration and launches into a sermon, declaring that forgiveness of sins is offered to everyone in Christ's name.

Still, as far as Peter has gone, it is not yet far enough. As usual, God is way out in front and has a surprising evangelism strategy for the church growth underway.

His sermon is about to be interrupted by the Holy Spirit. Nowhere else does the author of Luke and Acts tell of an event in which the gift of the Holy Spirit comes prior to baptism. But at this very moment, that is exactly what happens. While Peter was carrying on in the pulpit, the Holy Spirit fell upon everyone, including the Gentiles! The Jews with Peter react the way people in the Gospels do when a miracle occurs—they are astounded, amazed! This unprecedented act of God tops all the previous unprecedented acts of God in the verses before! At this point, Peter tosses his sermon manuscript, throws his hands up in the air and cries out: "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have? Someone get water in the font!"



The vote of the Session must have been unanimous because those Gentiles were baptized right then and there. This incredible passage ends with no mere throw-away line, some casual ‘and they lived happily ever after’ ending. It ends: “Then they invited him to stay for several days.” Oh my...things are about to get real...they’ve got to live out this baptism thing in tangibles...those Gentiles invited Peter and the other Jews to stay with them for several days...living together in the same houses, eating the same food. Clean and unclean. Circumcised and uncircumcised. Jew and Gentile. Kosher food and gluten-free and vegan and seafood and barbeque all at the same table. They’d have to figure out a new seating chart and how to eat family-style at a brand new table. God’s crazy idea of church.

When I first came to Brick Church, I often heard members describe this church as family, and that is just right. People talked about being a “neighborhood church,” and your history reveals the same. The Brick Church moved with its members twice over the last 250 years as the city expanded and neighborhoods moved north. You merged with other churches, too, twice making one congregation out of two. Some describe us as a “Carnegie Hill” neighborhood church, which is correct in terms of the church’s location and many of you walk to church easily as members did on Bleecker Street long ago. But our Mission Review showed us more. That members come from uptown and downtown and midtown, too. West Side and East Side and Bronxville and boroughs beyond, as far south as Florida. There is even an online congregation, too, joining us for worship.

This is worth noting when we think about “evangelism.” There is so much growth going on way past 96th Street and below Lexington and 3rd Avenues and people are joining Brick Church beyond the usual parameters of ‘walkability.’ We aren’t reaching out yet as far as we could. The Spirit is, though. Way out ahead of us. And we rejoice in the gifts these new members are bringing. Before we began to think about our mission in new ways...or began to talk about an ‘Evangelism Committee’ and before your new Senior Minister has arrived, this congregation is being shaped anew.



A few months into my tenure here, May of 2018, I think, I was at a reception in the Living Room. I remember asking one of you in your mid-thirties if I would not see you again until September. Everyone had been telling me the congregation leaves *en masse* for the summer. Whoever you were, you looked right at me and said, “No, we’ll be around. Not all of us leave for the summer.” It was for me a teaching moment, a reminder that our assumptions and so then our practices need to be checked. Then we began to notice, too, that not everything needed to be canceled every 3-day weekend either...that plenty of people, including children and youth, were around. Our 3rd grade Bible presentations need to take place when all the school systems are in session, not just some. Adult Education is worth it in the summer. Now, these are more subtle changes taking place than the astounding shifts of Acts, chapter 10...but they are important nonetheless; and signs that the Holy Spirit is at work among us, beyond us, bringing long-term members into relationships with those more newly arrived. So that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we might always be ‘becoming the church,’ with all of us being converted along the way.

Hazel and Gladys brought their one and only evangelism prospect to church. Her name was Verleen. Verleen’s life experiences and current situation were pretty different than most everyone else’s in the church and some felt uncomfortable. She came to Bible Study one week and let’s just say her insights and the prayer concerns she shared were a lot more interesting or real and raw than anyone else had dared to share. Helen told Willimon afterward, “Wow. Your Bible Studies used to be pretty dull, but this one was great! I can’t wait to invite some more people to come!”ⁱⁱ

It can happen the other way, too. Nadia Bolz-Weber is a tattooed, salty-talking Lutheran preacher who has become famous, in a preacher-sized kind of way, for her offbeat yet liturgical style. She pastored the House for All Saints and Sinners in Denver and was proud of the funky, offbeat congregation that formed. A newspaper even did a story about her. After that publicity, people started showing up from the suburbs and traditional congregations, hungry for something different...for something that seemed ‘real.’ The church grew. Nadia didn’t like it



much. She was afraid the “edgy, marginalized people they had intentionally attracted were now going to see a lot of people who looked like their parents and think... ‘This isn’t for me.’ She, and her members who had rejected traditional church, were now rejecting the traditional folk coming to them! So Nadia called for a church meeting about the “sudden growth and demographic changes.” She figured the newcomers who didn’t fit in would come to realize that and would self-select out. Each person started sharing why they had come there and what they had found in the community of saints and sinners. A conversion of everyone was underway, it seems.

Nadia concluded: “It goes without saying that the House for All Saints and Sinners is stronger now because of those newcomers. You can look around at the 120 or so gathered on any given Sunday and think *I am unclear what all these people have in common*. Out of the corner of your eye there’s a homeless guy serving communion to a corporate lawyer and out of the other corner is a teenage girl with pink hair holding the baby of a soccer mom. And there I was a year ago,” she says, “fearing that the weirdness of our church was going to be diluted.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Thank goodness the Holy Spirit continues to interrupt us, our plans and programs and preaching, to astound us and expand us beyond our ability to imagine. Thank goodness for God’s surprising evangelism that leads the church to continued conversion and growth into a life together we could not have planned by committee, armed with a church growth strategy and glossy brochures.

Amen.

ⁱ William H. Willimon, “Church Growth” in **The Last Word** (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 119-120.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 121.

ⁱⁱⁱ Nadia Bolz-Weber, “The Wrong Kind of Different,” in **Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint** (New York: Jericho Books, 2013), 178-187.