

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ
Fourth Sunday of Easter- April 25, 2010

Scripture lessons: Psalm 23 & Acts 11:1-18

REACH OUT

“We’ve had this program where we’re trying to get back in touch with our inner-city community. To do that, we made up these little bags of donuts. We stuck four donuts in a sack, along with a prayer, and had some of our members take them door-to-door to different homes.

“A few weeks into the project, an older man showed up in our worship on Sunday. When I asked if there were any prayer requests, he stood up and said, ‘I guess I haven’t been in a church for 30 years, maybe longer. I’ve been having a tough time of it lately. I just barely get by on my Social Security.

“Last week, I had only enough money for my medicine and nothing for food. I went downtown, bought my pills, and had nothing left. I’d been sitting around my apartment all day, with nothing to eat, and no possibility of anything to eat until my check came at the end of the week.

“But then some of you people knocked on my door. You handed me that sack of donuts and it was literally food for a starving man. Those donuts were as much love and concern as I’ve seen in a long, long time and I’m here to say thank you for them. I’d like to be part of a group like yours, if this is the sort of thing that you do for other people.”

The minister who tells this story says, “I guess there was a time when evangelism required people who were particularly good with words, those who could testify to the Christian gospel with eloquence and charm. Or you had to be some sort of dramatic martyr to be an effective witness. But nowadays, maybe things are in such a state that it doesn’t take all that much to reach people for Christ. Just a few donuts in a sack with a prayer can be enough.”

Tony Campolo is a long-time, deeply devoted Christian evangelist. A former Ivy League professor of sociology, he has worked for many years with college students. As part of his ministry, he has founded an organization that aims to get recent college graduates to give two years of their lives to serving in Jesus’ name in some of our nation’s poorest cities. They go into neighborhoods where most people, especially outsiders, are usually reluctant to go. They use local churches within the neighborhoods as their base of operations. Many of those churches are holding on for dear life, held afloat by a few loyal and older members.

As one of their basic activities, Campolo’s charges fan out into the community, block by block, to knock on doors. Many of the residents, if they’re at home, refuse to answer for fear of who might be on the other side. But for those who do answer, the young people ask if they could pray and, if so, what they would like them to pray for. They tell the residents that they will take those prayer requests back to the church from which they’ve come and another group there will pray for them daily.

They’ve discovered that offering prayer for people can be a powerful act of evangelism. The churches these young people are based in start to grow. Neighborhood folks are brought into relationship with the love of Jesus through this simple act of reaching out.

There’s something in the core of our faith that demands this reaching out. It’s been there from our beginnings as, for example, in today’s second Scripture from the book of Acts. It tells of the church making its first Gentile convert, a man named Cornelius, a Roman army officer and a leader of Rome’s occupation forces in Jerusalem. How in the world has this happened?

At first, the church has seen the good news of Jesus as intended only for their fellow Jews. They’ve understood it as meant for their own chosen people of Israel, but now a Gentile, a pagan Roman occupier has heard the gospel, believed, and been baptized. Peter tells the church step-by-step what he’s done that has led to this.

Most of his moves have come from a dream. From the dream stories given to us in the Old Testament and carried into the New, we know that dreams are often the means by which God makes a big move in a

person's life. This one, made by Peter towards the Gentiles, hasn't been at his initiative. God has moved him in a direction that he's neither foreseen nor planned.

In his dream, Peter sees a large sheet being lowered by its four corners from heaven. In it are animals that Peter, as Jew who keeps kosher, would *never* eat. But a voice from heaven tells him to eat them and Peter says, "By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth." The voice answers, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

Peter realizes that his dream isn't about "unclean animals". It's about *people* that he has considered "unclean". The Gentiles, traditionally held to be outside of the promises of God, are now being brought into them. This happens according to God's plan which cannot be thwarted (verse 17).

The whole church is astounded by this. They had thought the good news was just for them and their kind, but it turns out that the risen Christ wants the whole world. He wants to invade every people and realm with the great gospel news. He wants to expand the movement of God's grace far beyond the established boundaries to people like us- yes, even to Gentiles.

We remember that on the first Easter, as St. Matthew tells, it, when the women went to Jesus' tomb, the angel met them and said, "He is risen!" What else did the angel say? Not, "Kick back and relish that this means that God will one day raise you from the dead, too." No- the angel said, "Go and tell!"

Go and be evangelists; spread the good word; share the great news of what God is doing. What God is up to is so amazing, so awesome, and so all-encompassing that it cries out to be heard everywhere.

Then again, let's face facts. For a long time in churches like ours the word "evangelism" has been a big no-no. It conjures up for us images of all sorts of things that we want no part of.

We hear the "e-word" and think of cold-calling on people, not to give them donuts and a prayer or to ask them if and what we could pray for them, but to pressure them into becoming Christians just like us and to threaten them with the sword or with hell if they don't.

We think of TV evangelists decked out with flamboyant styles, slick sales pitches, and mechanical smiles who dig for money, money, and more money with which to build their personal empires.

We think of pretending like we have it all together, like we're the ones with all the answers, like we're the specially chosen supremes who because of our faith no longer have any doubts, fears, or problems with which we have to struggle.

We think of all these things and cringe at the thought of doing them. We rightly cringe because these *are* gross distortions and abuses of evangelism that we need to stay far away from. But what should we do instead?

Are the dangers of evangelistic distortion and abuse so strong that it's best for us just to forget about "the e-word"? Should we figure that if people somehow find us on their own that's great, but, if not, then it's no big deal? By no means- for if we do that we throw out the sweet baby with the dirty bath water which is always a major mistake.

Instead, I think we first need to get clear on what we, as the church, have to reach out with. Then we need to remember why the particular gifts we have to share can be such great news for other people. Consider, for instance, these basic treasures of the church's life. Are these things that people can find just anywhere?

In the church, we gather, welcome, and affirm each other not on the basis of family, nation, race, class, gender, health, age, political party, sexual orientation, looks, school, money, possessions, intelligence, talent or any of the other markers we so frequently use to divide and separate. Instead, we gather, welcome, and affirm each other as equally beloved children of God.

This gift is much rarer and more precious than we usually think. I recall a fellow minister sharing a remark that a young, single parent mother once made to him about her child and the church. She said, "My boy's smart enough to realize what you're trying to do here. The other day he told me, 'Mom, I like going to Sunday school because it's the only place where an adult besides you ever relates to me who's not paid to do it. Everywhere else, somebody gets money to look after me, but in Sunday school, the teachers do it for free. They do it just because they care about me.'" In a world where our relationships frequently are tit for tat and where many of us are isolated, lonely, cut off, and put down, caring on the basis of "You're God's child" doesn't happen just everywhere.

In the church, we also regularly slow down. We slow down and stop so that we can seriously listen to and reflect on both our personal lives and the life of our larger world. We strive to go beneath the surface and bustle of things to gain deeper and better understanding of who we really are, of what's actually going on with us, and of what truly matters most. In a rush, rush, skim, skim, and go, go, go world that kind of slowing down and reflecting doesn't happen just everywhere.

In our slowing down and searching we also, and above all, wrestle openly with what otherwise is almost always ignored in our everyday lives and relationships- namely, the question of God. In this place we remember that everyone, always and unavoidably, has *some* God that we put our faith in. We remember that all of us have that ultimate Someone or Something which we hold to be Most Real and Most Important and in relation to which we believe that we will find our genuine happiness and fulfillment.

Here, we always wrestle with that inescapable fact in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This gospel keeps before us the claim that the true God, the one who really is the Most Real and Most Important is not me, myself and I. It's not my family, nation, race, class, gender, health, age, political party, sexual orientation, looks, school, money, possessions, intelligence, talent or anything else that's limited only to me and this world.

Instead, the true God is the Eternal, Triune One who has created everything, who loves passionately everyone and everything that God has made, and who forgives and embraces all of us even when we go astray, even when we do the worst wrongs. From the Jesus gospel which gathers us, we hear that the authentic meaning and satisfaction of our lives will be found in learning to love as this God does. We hear that this love ultimately cannot be defeated, that in the End this God who really is God will be all in all so that death and mourning and crying and pain will be no more. In a world where so often we flounder, stumble, and get hurt in trying to figure out what we're already worshiping, this is great news that people don't hear just everywhere they go.

But they can hear it from us, if we reach out with it- reach out not as pretentious, self-righteous and aggressive know-it-alls, but as humble sharers, givers of amazing gifts that have been given to us through no merit of our own. We can offer them with a bag of donuts and a prayer. We can reach out with them through a simple, "Come and see." Amen.

Kurt Kirchoff

PASTORAL PRAYER

Glorious God, in this Easter season we marvel at the power of Your love. Out of the worst failure, defeat, and death You have raised Jesus Christ to new life and have given us the promise of Your life eternal in him. Christ is risen indeed and he calls us to reach out beyond every cozy confine to share the boundary-busting power of Your Easter gifts. Your life eternal both now and in the world to come is meant not just for us, but for everyone, for Your whole creation. Launch us again into the adventure of sharing it freely, not as pretentious, self-righteous and aggressive know-it-alls, but as humble sharers of Your gifts that have been given to us through no merit of our own.

Help Your church everywhere to live faith in You so openly, so wisely, and so winsomely that everyone will see in us the joy of Your Easter life. Through us may Your victory over every failure, defeat, and death be made visible and unmistakable. Keep slowing us down and gathering us as Your people so that we will keep reaching out to welcome and affirm everyone as Your beloved children. We pray this in the name of Jesus, our Risen Savior, and we pray as he has taught us, saying together, "Our Father, . . ." Amen.