

# Everyday Evangelists

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## **Matthew 28:16-20**

In one of his tall tales, Mark Twain tells how upset and angry he had become about all the discord and violence among God's creatures and how he had decided to take matters into his own hands: "So I built a cage and in it I put a dog and a cat. And after a little training I got the dog and cat to the point where they lived peaceably together. Then I introduced a pig, a goat, a kangaroo, some birds and a monkey. And, after a few adjustments, they learned to live in harmony. So encouraged was I by such successes that I added a Catholic, a Presbyterian, a Jew, a Muslim, and a Buddhist, along with a Baptist missionary that I captured on the same trip. And in a very short while, there wasn't a single living thing left in the cage."

As I suggested last week, too often this is the world's impression of religion and church – more a source of division and conflict than anything else. Who wants that? And yet, at the end of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells us – you and me – to go into the world and make disciples...to share the Good News. But exactly how are we supposed to do that in a world – a county – which is often so negative about church and church people – which views any form of institutional religion with suspicion, if not downright hostility?

And, on top of that, I suspect that even we aren't all that sure about the command of Jesus to go out into all the world. When it comes to describing ourselves, I suspect that few, if any, of us describe ourselves as evangelists. Just what is it Jesus is asking us to do here? What does it mean to move from membership to discipleship – to go out and witness to our faith?

It was the spring of 1963 in Birmingham, and it looked as if the civil rights movement was about to suffer another defeat. The police had more jail space than the civil rights workers had people. But then one Sunday, reports historian Taylor Branch, 2000 young people came out of worship at the New Pilgrim Baptist Church and prepared to march. The police were shocked. How much longer was this going to go on? How many more people would they have to arrest? Didn't they know they didn't have a chance of winning?

The line of young people was five blocks long. As the marchers approached the line of police officers and their dogs, the notorious sheriff, Bull Connor, walked out to confront them, shouting for the firemen to turn on their hoses. The line of people came close – face-to-face with Connor and the firemen and the police. Then they knelt as one and prayed. The Rev. Charles Billups then stood and shouted, "Turn on your water! Turn loose your dogs! We will stand here 'til we die!" Then he and the young people began to walk forward. And, amazingly, unbelievably, the line of firemen parted for them to pass. Onlookers said it was as if the Red Sea had parted once again for the children of Israel.

Talk about witnessing to your faith, proclaiming and living the good news of Jesus Christ for all to see! What kind of church does it take to nurture Christians capable of standing like that, capable of facing down injustice and oppression, no matter what the cost?

It's a powerful story to be sure, but is it us...is it me? I suspect not a lot of us have been called to witness to our faith in such dramatic form. I have taken my share of public stands over the years, but I have never been called upon to face down billy clubs, police dogs and fire hoses, literally to risk my life for my faith. As much as admire what Rev. Billups and those courageous young people did in the name of Jesus, we aren't all called to do that. There must be other, less dramatic paths to faithful discipleship, to being evangelists, to witnessing to our faith.

Another story – this one told by the late and much missed, Michael Yaconelli: John's physical and mental disabilities required him to live in a 24 hour care facility. He could walk, but needed assistance with just about everything else, and his speech was impaired, making his words difficult to understand. His parents lived some distance away and periodically, his mother suffered from bouts of depression, largely brought on by guilt for not being able to care for her son. During one depressive episode, she stayed in bed for days, unresponsive to all efforts to engage her, even her husband's. Concerned, John's father brought him home to see if his presence could bring her out of her deep despair.

When he arrived home, John went straight into his mother's bedroom and sat on her bed. He stayed with her a long time but said nothing. When his father came into the room, John pointed to a large flower vase and repeated over and over again, "Ca...ca...ca...oke." Finally, his father understood that John was asking him to fill the vase with Coke.

After his father filled the vase, John slowly and painfully walked into the kitchen and returned with a small piece of bread. Tenderly he took his mother's hand and placed the bread in it. He then dipped the bread into the Coke and gently lifted it to his mother's mouth as he began stumbling through the words of the communion service. His mother's eyes filled with tears as she took the bread, and within a few hours, the depression lifted and her recovery began.

Says Yaconelli, "John might not have been able to do many things, but he could feel. His speech might have been impaired, but his heart worked just fine. He had one gift even his father didn't have: he knew what his mother needed. He trusted what he could do instead of getting frustrated about what he couldn't do, and then he committed a tiny act of discipleship. He could have lamented his limitations; he could have despaired about the possibility of bringing his mother out of depression; he could have suggested his father hire a professional to help his mother. Instead, he did what Christians do when they don't know what to do. He went to the arsenal of weapons which separate the church from every other organization and decided on one of the most unlikely: communion. He realized that the foolish, upside down, invisible kingdom of God is still more powerful than all the brilliant weapons of our culture."

"Go into the world and make disciples..." It is easy for us to get the impression that God is all about the big and spectacular – true disciples are those who do great things for God, and if God is not doing great things through me then I am really not much of a disciple. God doesn't need me. But is that true? Are we giving up too easily?

Yaconelli again: "Spiritual people are about tiny things, which is the fruit of their spirituality. The spiritual life is not a life of success; it is a life of faithfulness, and it's not easy. God does "big" things once in a while, but there is no question that the primary work of God in the world is tiny salt and tiny light. That's why Jesus told the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, the mustard seed, the widow's small offering. He was trying to tell us something. The spiritual life – I would add, the life of faithful discipleship in the world – is a life filled with little decisions, tiny steps toward God, tiny glimpses of God's presence, little changes and small movings, tiny successes and imperceptible stirrings... Christianity shows itself most powerfully in the inconspicuous servant, the unrecognized saint, the invisible disciple." (At this time a few stories were shared about some of the small movings and tiny successes of our church's 125 Days of Caring)

When Jesus tells us to go into the world and make disciples he isn't suggesting that you and I, on our own, will bring world peace or solve global warming or somehow put an end to reality TV. But he is calling us to be faithful, calling us to love God every day and seek to live God every day in all that we say and do. He is reminding us that wherever we go, there goes the church of Jesus Christ. He is challenging us to recognize the significance of the insignificant, the eternal difference ordinary, messy, unfinished, under-construction people like you and me can make.

I think of the final verse of the old hymn, "I Sing a Song of the Saints of God:"

*They lived not only in ages past,  
There are hundreds of thousands still.  
The world is bright with the joyous saints,  
Who love to do Jesus' will.  
You can meet them in school, or in lanes or at sea,  
In church or in trains or in shops or at tea.  
For the saints of God are just folk like me,  
And I mean to be one still.*

Yes, you and me, everyday evangelists.