

“The E-word”

Hubert Den Draak, May 19, 2019
Scripture passage: Romans 1:1-17



It took my mom a serious life crisis, a nasty divorce in fact, to find her faith. Now mind you, she had been going to church all her life because, well, that's what you did. She went through the motions, but I had never seen it make a real difference in her life. It's probably safe to say that she was a "Sunday morning Christian" with the kind of faith that just wasn't connected to what you did the other 6½ days of the week.

That changed after her divorce. Suddenly, nothing was as it had been before. *She* wasn't as she'd been before; in fact, she wasn't even sure who she was anymore. She was filled with fear, hatred and anger; she wasn't sure what to do with her life – everything was up for grabs. Including of course her faith.

It took her many years and a number of encounters with the right people at the right time to slowly develop a trust in God, *and* a sense of gratefulness for everything she had. She had grown, so she was able to no longer focus on what she had lost but on what she had gained. But it had taken her a crisis and a long time to get there.

Sunday mornings became something she looked forward to. She would always and in no uncertain terms let the minister know what she thought of the service and his message, and what he could do to improve (hey, we're Dutch, we always know better). The faith she developed became the bedrock of her life. It was a simple, almost childlike faith, but it was strong and most of all: it had transformed her.

She had become a new woman, and she was aware of it. She was aware of how God was active in her life. That was a pretty big deal, so of course she couldn't keep that to herself, she wanted to talk about it – with that same childlike, disarming honesty and passion.

Her apartment wasn't very far from a Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses who would often go from door to door in her building. She would invite them in for coffee to hear their story, and then she'd share hers. I'm telling you, the surefire way to stop any Jehovah's Witness from knocking on your door ever again is to invite them in and share the joy of your faith and what they're missing out on!

Years later, when my mom needed home support, she hired someone to help her clean her apartment, get groceries, and provide some company. This lady happened to be Muslim. They had a rocky start at first, but after a while my mom and her Muslim support worker would have these faith-centred conversations.

My mom was evangelical in the true sense of the word. For many modern Christians, including United Church people, evangelism is something that makes us nervous. The “E-word”, evangelism, immediately conjures up this image of pushy, aggressive, intolerant, fundamentalist Bible-thumpers, forcing their faith on others.

But the fact is as Christians we can't escape evangelism. Christ calls us to go and make disciples. The entire Book of Acts is all about evangelism, about Christ's disciples and Paul going throughout the entire known world to share the gospel, the good news of Jesus.

Today we read the first few verses of Paul's famous letter to the church in Rome. Paul had established many churches, but this wasn't one of them. But it was a church he very much wanted to visit. We don't know why, these letters are literally one-sided conversations, like overhearing a phone conversation, so there's much we don't know. But we do know that ultimately Paul would end up visiting Rome, only not by his own free will. He came to Rome as a prisoner to stand trial, and many scholars think Rome is where Paul was executed. But writing this letter, that was still in the future.

Paul's greeting and opening verses say a lot about the importance of mission and evangelism, and it is a message that is as important to the church in Halifax now as it was to the church in Rome all those years ago.

Paul greets the Romans by saying that he is a servant of Jesus Christ “called to be an apostle and sent out to preach God's good news.” The word apostle comes from a Greek word which means “one who is sent”, like a messenger. Paul was certain that he was sent out into the world with the message of God's good news that could be as transformative to others as it had been to him.

Now to be sent, you have to be called first, and Paul acknowledges that too. He says that God has called him and sent him to preach the Good News to others.

We use words like “calling” when we talk about clergy, and it's easy to think that only formally educated and vetted clergy like me are the folks that are called to be sent. I think that's a serious mistake, although I have to admit that sometimes this mistake is perpetuated by those same clergy, some of whom believe that somehow they're of more importance than the people in the pews. We are *not*. Everyone here has been called to be God's sent people, God's messenger. Everyone here is called to be apostles and sent out to share God's good news just, as I am. Don't take it from me, take it from my mom, she got it.

Then, in the last two verses of this morning's passage, Paul says he's “not ashamed” of the gospel. Those are strong words for us modern Christians, because we tend to be ashamed of, or at least embarrassed by the gospel, don't we? I mean, how often do we mention it in daily conversation? Maybe we're just too Canadian and think it's impolite to talk about faith (together with politics, money and sex), because it would upset our family and friends. Or maybe it's because we don't want to be seen as those weirdos who force their faith upon others. Or maybe we're just Sunday morning Christians, I don't know...

There's a number of studies about how Christians are perceived by non-Christians, especially by Millennials, the generation that's conspicuously absent in church. And they

all have very similar outcomes. The top three perceptions of Christians by folks outside the church is: 1) Christians hate gays and lesbians. 2) Christians are judgmental. And 3) Christians are hypocrites.¹ Um, seems we have a bit of an image crisis on our hands...!

But apparently, that's what people see or hear about us; and yet I'm pretty sure that's not the first thing people experienced when they encountered Jesus or his apostles. It reminds me of that famous quote by Ghandi when he was asked if he was a Christian. And his response was, "Oh I love Jesus. I just wish his followers took him more seriously."

Paul never pushed his faith into people's faces, that probably wouldn't even occur to him. Paul *lived* his faith, and by living it, people noticed and were drawn to it. He shared the Good News because it was deeply embedded into his being, driving everything he says and does. Paul wasn't ashamed of the gospel, not ashamed of how it had turned his life upside-down that he's just got to tell others; not in a way that is pushy or confrontational, but in way that's inviting and respectful and generous.

We know that Jesus makes a real difference in our lives and has become part of who and what we are (I hope!). A faith that's alive in us is always transformative in some way, as both Paul and my mom found out.

So how does it show? Knowing it is one thing, but what do we do with it, how do we follow through? It's something we should talk about; but not in a pushy, holier-than-thou way with the agenda to get more people on "our side" or to get more bums in pews.

Remember those Jehovah's Witnesses? They were disarmed by my mom's evangelism because she had no agenda, she wasn't trying to convince them, she just wanted to talk about it.

In fact, she and her Muslim support worker had conversations where *life* was shared, where both women experienced growth and understanding, and joy in each other's company. I'm beginning to believe that's what it means to be sent out, to be called by God to share the good news. Evangelism happens when we share God in our daily lives, when we are not willing to keep quiet, yet are respectful of our family's and friends' life choices. It's never an either/or choice, it's always both/and.

Christian author and activist Shane Claiborne put it this way: "The Gospel spreads best, not through force, but through fascination". Isn't that interesting: not through force, but through fascination... sounds a lot like the way Jesus lived his ministry, doesn't it? Jesus didn't go from door to door trying to convince people to see things his way, he didn't climb soapboxes on street corners. People were drawn to him out of fascination by how he lived, by what he said and did.

We are also called and sent out to live a life that truly fascinates others, a life that's not ashamed of its faith in God and the resurrected Christ; a life that includes everyone; a life that's about doing justice in the widest sense of the word. Sure, at times that can be hard or complicated... So thank God it's not just up to us; thank God we're never alone in this. Amen.

¹ for instance <https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2012/10/14/1144628/-Who-Do-They-Say-We-Are-Anti-homosexual-Judgmental-Hypocritical> and <https://www.barna.com/research/what-millennials-want-when-they-visit-church/>

Scripture reading for May 19, 2019
Romans 1:1-17

This letter is from Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, chosen by God to be an apostle and sent out to preach his Good News. God promised this Good News long ago through his prophets in the holy Scriptures. The Good News is about his Son. In his earthly life he was born into King David's family line, and he was shown to be the Son of God when he was raised from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit. He is Jesus Christ our Lord. Through Christ, God has given us the privilege and authority as apostles to tell Gentiles everywhere what God has done for them, so that they will believe and obey him, bringing glory to his name.

And you are included among those Gentiles who have been called to belong to Jesus Christ. I am writing to all of you in Rome who are loved by God and are called to be saints.

May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace.

Let me say first that I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith in him is being talked about all over the world. God knows how often I pray for you. Day and night I bring you and your needs in prayer to God, whom I serve with all my heart by spreading the Good News about his Son.

One of the things I always pray for is the opportunity, God willing, to come at last to see you. For I long to visit you so I can bring you some spiritual gift that will help you grow strong in the Lord. When we get together, I want to encourage you in your faith, but I also want to be encouraged by yours.

I want you to know, dear brothers and sisters, that I planned many times to visit you, but I was prevented until now. I want to work among you and see spiritual fruit, just as I have seen among other Gentiles. For I have a great sense of obligation to people in both the civilized world and the rest of the world, to the educated and uneducated alike. So I am eager to come to you in Rome, too, to preach the Good News.

For I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ. It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes—the Jew first and also the Gentile. This Good News tells us how God makes us right in his sight. This is accomplished from start to finish by faith. As the Scriptures say, "It is through faith that a righteous person has life."