

Witnessing or Proselytizing?

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Luke 10:1-11

Sermons Series:
Best Spiritual
Practices

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This fall I'll be attending the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization in South Africa with two others from this church. We'll join 4,200 Christians from 200 countries in planning how to reach the estimated two billion people worldwide who have never heard the good news of Jesus Christ.

Evangelization is a fuzzy word to many people. Some people think evangelism smacks of proselytizing. Nobody wants to be accused of proselytizing. It's become a negative, pejorative word in our day.

Ten relief workers with a Christian humanitarian agency were executed two weeks ago in Afghanistan for proselytizing. This international medical team was enroute to deliver free dental and eye care to a remote Afghan village. The Taliban, who claimed responsibility for the killings, accused them of proselytizing. Afghanistan is a militant Islamic state, so proselytizing is prohibited by law.

All ten relief workers were Christians. When Jesus said to heal the sick, they took him at his word. They were discreet with words. They let their

actions do the talking. The father of one of the young women slain in the attack said "They were the hands and feet of Jesus not the mouth of Jesus."

Proselytizing uses physical coercion and psychological intimidation to impose belief on people. Evangelism is another matter altogether. It originates from the Greek word "euangelion," meaning to share good news. Jesus says nothing about applying pressure in sharing his good news with people.

Jesus sent out his 12 disciples to proclaim his kingdom (Luke 9:2). These 12 are also referred to as "apostles," from the Greek apostolos, meaning the sent out ones. Jesus literally sent out his "sent out ones."

In our Scripture lesson, Jesus sends out 70 more disciples. Biblical scholars speculate that the 70 may correspond to the 70 elders who helped Moses in the wilderness or the 70 nations of the world listed in Genesis 10. Maybe the 70 illustrate that Jesus' mission is not confined to a few. He sends 12, then 70 and asks the 70 to pray for still more laborers for the harvest.

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Conversion is
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You will notice in verse 1 that they're sent out in pairs (10:1). The disciples often go about their missionary travels two by two in Acts. They can offer support and encouragement this way. When one is down, the other can offer encouragement. When one lacks energy, the other has energy to give.

In a Jewish court of law, a person couldn't be accused of a crime on the testimony of a single witness. Two witnesses were required to bring a charge forward to trial. Two would serve as a more compelling witness.

Jesus likens his mission to a harvest in verse 2. No surprise here. Jesus' disciples are farmers and shepherds, who live close to the soil. Jesus said, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; ask the Lord of the harvest to send out more laborers into his harvest" (10:2). The success of their mission will not be determined solely by their efforts in the field. Their achievements will be the result of prayer and reliance on God's sovereign will.

We are not lords of the harvest. There is a "Lord of the harvest" and it's not us. God is sovereign and we are not. I tell you, it's better this way. As it is, Christians attempt to manipulate God's message to suit their own purposes.

Conversion is not our job. We don't convert anyone. Conversion is God's doing. We share the message; God converts.

As Jesus sends his disciples out in mission, he says nothing about taking along a travel bag or perhaps a gift for the people who provide their lodging. Instead, he orders them to travel light: "Do not take a purse or bag or sandals and do not greet anyone on the road" (10:4). What's up with that? Even common courtesies are cast aside. Look, when it's time to put up the wheat, there can be no delay. Forget the packing. Forget the pleasantries. The kingdom of God has come near.

I'm fascinated that Jesus returns to this incident later at the Last Supper. "When I sent you out without a purse, bag or sandals, did you lack anything?" They answer, "Not a thing." His disciples went without provisions to learn dependence upon God. Now that Jesus has made his point, he gives them permission to take along provisions for the future (Luke 22:35-38).

Jesus tells them to eat whatever is set before them (10:8) and accept whatever accommodations are provided. Beggars can't be choosers. "Do not move around house to house," he says (10:7). He puts the kibosh on I'll-stay-with-you-until-I-get-a-better-offer kind of attitude.

When the disciples enter a home, Jesus instructs them to extend the customary Jewish greeting of peace to its occupants (10:5-6). The Hebrew

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word shalom is an offer of good will from God. Sometimes this peace will be reciprocated; sometimes it won't. Jesus reiterates the same point in verses 8-9. Sometimes your message will be welcomed, sometimes not.

I take this to mean that some people will receive your witnessing and some people won't. Don't take it personally. If they don't welcome the message, don't force the issue. Don't hit people over the head with it.

Kevin Harney illustrates this point in the book *Seismic Shifts*. He writes about Margaret who, at the same time every day, opened her kitchen pantry to fetch a huge bottle of castor oil and a spoon from the kitchen drawer. When Patches, her Yorkshire terrier, heard Margaret go into the kitchen, he would run and hide. Sometimes he would hide under the bed or crawl behind Margaret's recliner. Patches knew what was coming.

Someone had convinced Margaret that her beloved canine would have strong teeth, a beautiful coat and long life if she gave him a spoonful of castor oil every day. So, as an act of love, she would corner Patches, pin him down, pry open his mouth and pour castor oil down his throat. Neither Patches nor Margaret enjoyed this daily ritual.

One day, in this tug of war, Patches sent the bottle of castor oil flying across the floor. Margaret went for a towel to

clean up the mess. When she returned, she found Patches licking up the spilled castor oil. Suddenly it dawned on her. Patches actually liked castor oil. He just hated being pinned down and having it poured down his throat.

Welcome to the world of evangelism. Many people actually are drawn to the person of Jesus Christ. They just don't like to have it forced down their throats.

Our problem at Vienna Presbyterian isn't that we coerce people into God's kingdom. Is anyone around here guilty of forcing the issue? Our problem is just the opposite. We have lots of people who never share their faith with anyone.

When the subject of religion comes up in polite conversation, why do our tongues stick to the roofs of our mouths? I can think of three reasons.

The first reason we don't witness: we don't know quite what to say. If you are stymied about what to say, think of God's Big Story of creation, fall and redemption. We have been *created* to live in relationship with God. We *fall* out of relationship with God through something called sin. But God offers us *redemption* or rescue through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Then, you can personalize your witness by sharing how God has brought redemption into your own life.

*Tomorrow
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another day.*

*Are you sure
about that?*

The second reason we don't witness: we aren't convinced it's our job to say something. Speaking about God is the job of religious professionals. That's what we pay you to do. Many parents bring their kids to church so we can instill faith in them. Let me set the record straight. If the Christian message is not practiced and reinforced at home, it's not likely to make much impact. Kids can read between the lines to see whether faith is important to their parents.

Jesus sent 12, then 70 and, in turn, asked the 70 to pray for more disciples. "The harvest is plentiful, the laborers are few. Ask God to send more laborers into the fields."

The third reason we don't witness: we aren't convinced people will be all that interested. Do we believe Jesus when he says the harvest is plentiful? Some of us act as if the harvest is meager. People don't seem interested. I wouldn't be so sure!

Experience has shown me you can't predict with certainty who will be interested and who won't. Some of the people I thought would be interested never respond, and some of those I thought would never be interested are all about it.

People often mask their longings for God behind superficiality and fancy titles. Once you scratch below the surface, suddenly their longings appear.

Jesus announced, "The kingdom of God has come near."

The verb "has come" appears in perfect tense on the lips of Jesus to stress the lingering effects of his coming. Take advantage, my friends, of his coming while there is still time.

An ancient story recalls how Satan once summoned his junior devils to prevent Christians from witnessing. One of his lieutenants, Rancor, said to Satan, "We should convince them there is no God." Satan sneered at Rancor, "This will never work. They know there is a God."

Another of Satan's aids, Bitterness, spoke up: "We'll convince them that God does not really care about right or wrong." Satan entertained the idea for a moment but rejected it. Too many Christians already know that God cares.

Malice, the third satanic helper, came up with an idea: "We'll let them go on thinking there is a God and that he cares about right and wrong. But we'll keep whispering to them, 'There is no hurry. There is no hurry.'"

"Perfect," said Satan, "this will ruin them by the thousands." Satan knew Malice's plan would become an unqualified success.

"The kingdom of God has come near." Sadly, some think we've still got time. Tomorrow will be another day. There's no hurry. Are you sure about that?