

EVANGELISM

Script for Homily Preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, July 3, 2016

Ordinary 14 – Communion by Intinction

Higganum Congregational Church Memorial Garden, 9:30 a.m.

“In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, diversity; in all things, charity”

Luke 9:51-10:11, Common English Bible (CEB)

As the time approached when Jesus was to be taken up, he [set his face] to go to Jerusalem. He sent messengers on ahead of him. Along the way, they entered a Samaritan village to prepare for his arrival, but the Samaritan villagers refused to welcome him because he was determined to go to Jerusalem. When the disciples James and John saw this, they said, “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to consume them?” But Jesus turned and spoke sternly to them, and they went on to another village.

As Jesus and his disciples traveled along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” Jesus replied, “Foxes have dens and the birds in the sky have nests, but the Human One has no place to lay his head.”

Then Jesus said to someone else, “Follow me.” He replied, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead. But you go and spread the news of God’s kingdom.”

Someone else said to Jesus, “I will follow you, Lord, but first let me say good-bye to those in my house.” Jesus said to him, “No one who puts a hand on the plow and looks back is fit for God’s kingdom.”

After these things, the Lord commissioned seventy-two others and sent them on ahead in pairs to every city and place he was about to go. He said to them, “The harvest is bigger than you can imagine, but there are few workers. Therefore, plead with the Lord of the harvest to send out workers for his harvest. Go! Be warned, though, that I’m sending you out as lambs among wolves. Carry no wallet, no bag, and no sandals. Don’t even greet anyone along the way.

Whenever you enter a house, first say, ‘May peace be on this house.’ If anyone there shares God’s peace, then your peace will rest on that person. If not, your blessing will return to you. Remain in this house, eating and drinking whatever they set before you, for workers deserve their pay. Don’t move from house to house. Whenever you enter a city and its people welcome you, eat what they set before you. Heal the sick who are there, and say to them, ‘God’s kingdom has come upon you.’ Whenever you enter a city and the people don’t welcome you, go out into the streets and say, ‘As a complaint against you, we brush off the dust of your city that has collected on our feet. But know this: God’s kingdom has come near to you.’”

Evangelism is a contested word in today's world. There are varieties of religious activity that can be called evangelism. The crusades of Billy Graham come to mind. Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses who travel in pairs, knocking on our doors and wanting to talk with us about their faith, come to mind. Most of us mainline Protestants are uncomfortable with evangelism. We don't like strangers trying to force their religious beliefs on us. We don't like the idea of trying to force our religious beliefs on someone else.

Sathi Clarke is a professor of theology at Wesley Theological Seminary, where my wife Mary Moschella taught pastoral care for nine years. Originally from India, Sathi is also ordained as an Episcopal priest. He and my wife Mary, who became good friends while they were on the Wesley faculty together, have remained good friends. (Sathi and I are not related, as far as we know – he spells Clarke with an “e” at the end.)

In a commentary on today's reading from Luke's Gospel, Sathi tells this story:

“As an Indian living in the United States I am struck by the relative ease with which Western Christians can gain access into the inner interreligious and multicultural world of Indian communities. On June 15, 2007, I was at an event that screened a video documenting a group of sincere and fervent American Christians on a very short "mission trip" to India.

“There were many moving and gracious encounters between these Western Christians and different segments of local Indian communities. However, one encounter has stayed with me. It brought together the interlinking of culture, the Bible, and mission in a strange way. Let me narrate this encounter as best as I remember.

“The camera zoomed in on a supposed mission event. The visiting Americans got off the minivan in which they were traveling and made their way toward the local people that had gathered outside their homes. Both sides in this encounter had very little idea about the other. Without wasting much time the Americans got straight to the point. They did not appear too interested in whom they were approaching, what questions these Indians might have for them, or what their situation in life might be. They were bursting with information that they needed to deposit in the community: Jesus loved them all, he was the God that saves all human beings, and the Bible testified to this divine revelation.

“They settled upon a middle-aged gentleman. They held a Bible to him and told him about the truth of Jesus Christ that was contained in it. All of this was done in English. The local gentleman spoke to them in Tamil, my native language, which enabled me to follow both the missionary's communication in English and the respondent's articulation in Tamil.

“The man said that he did read the Bible even though he was a Hindu. The American did not know what was being said to him, and the native translator did not share this fact. Perhaps he did not want to ruin the American's elated presumption that he was the bearer of wholly new good news! He had come with this gospel and wanted to give it to the local Indian.

“Once the missive was orally communicated the swift emissary went on to ask if he could pray with the gentleman. A courteous nod permitted the American to offer an English prayer in the power of the Holy Spirit and though the name of Jesus. The parting gift was a promise to get a Bible to him, quite ignorant that this Hindu gentleman had already informed him that he was reading the Bible, presumably in Tamil.

“The team got back into the minivan and left as quickly as they came. They were filled with joy that they had preached the good news to an eager non-Christian who could now very well be on the salvation path. While the characteristic porosity of the local South Indian community reemerged visibly in this encounter, I was also struck by the not-so-Western mannerism of these Americans. Quite unlike what they would have done in any downtown American city, they confidently entered into the private world of another society to entreat them to accept their religious views and prayed for them in public.”¹

Most American Christian missionary activity to the global village dates back to a couple of events in New England: the Haystack Prayer Meeting in Williamstown, MA in 1806; and the creation of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in Farmington, CT in 1812.

At its best, international Christian missionary activity has been able to balance spiritual and material concerns. In their concern to share their Christian faith, missionaries have also been concerned to show their faith through works of charity and justice.

At its worst, American missionary activity has been a form of religious and cultural imperialism, as noted above in Sathi Clarke's narrative. The eager missionary was not the least bit interested in knowing anything about the people with whom he was interacting, or about their culture. And what's even worse, he didn't show to the Indian people anything resembling the respect he would have shown to his fellow Americans back home.

Consider as a counter-example the instructions Jesus gives to the seventy-two messengers he sends out ahead of him on his journey to Jerusalem. Notice the importance Jesus assigns to hospitality. His messengers will be dependent for food and shelter on the hospitality of village residents. When hospitality is offered, the messengers are to graciously accept it. Whatever their host offers them, they will receive with gratitude.

These messengers are evangelists in the best sense of that word: they bring a message of good news to all who will listen. If Jesus were to send us out as bearers of good news to our surrounding community, perhaps we could use the poetry of John Greenleaf Whittier to help us communicate the good news. I'm thinking especially of the

¹Sathianathan Clarke, “global cultural traffic, christian mission, and biblical interpretation: rereading luke 10:1-12 through the eyes of an indian mission recipient,” *Ex Auditu* (January 2007), 162-178
<http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=0f4a2c18-6730-43dd-af2c-30dfc3154cd4%40sessionmgr4004&vid=1&hid=4112>.

hymn “Within the Maddening Maze of Things,” which is composed of stanzas taken from his long poem “The Eternal Goodness.” I conclude this morning with the good news according to John Greenleaf Whittier.

Within the maddening maze of things,
When tossed by storm and flood,
To one fixed trust my spirit clings;
I know that God is good!
No offering of my own I have,
Nor works my faith to prove;
I can but give the gifts He gave,
And plead His love for love.
I know not where His islands lift
Their fronded palms in air;
I only know I cannot drift
Beyond His love and care.
And so beside the silent sea
I wait the muffled oar;
No harm from Him can come to me
On ocean or on shore.
I know not what the future hath
Of marvel or surprise,
Assured alone that life and death
[God's] mercy underlies.²

²See *The Pilgrim Hymnal*, #360. For the original poem in its entirety, see <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-eternal-goodness/>.