

ST. † DAVID'S

EPISCOPAL CHURCH



"Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another."

Hebrews 10:23-25a

Growing Together for Evangelism
A Meditation from Alden Hathaway

When I was asked to compose a meditation on evangelism, and that this was the relevant scripture for the week, I found little to speak to my concept of what evangelism is. To many, evangelism may be most directly associated with world missions, for example, as depicted in the movie, "The Mission" or with the missionaries carrying the gospel to China or to the pygmies of the impenetrable forest. But I believe evangelism is a responsibility of the entire church and not just for those of us called to be missionaries.

In 1973 at the 64th General Convention, the Episcopal Church affirmed the accepted definition of evangelism;

"Evangelism is the presentation of Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, in such ways that persons may be led to accept him as savior, and follow him as Lord, within the fellowship of the church."

In an address delivered to the World Conference on Mission and Evangelism December 1996, Bishop Leslie Newbegin said this: *"The specific responsibility which has been given to the church, and to nobody else, is the responsibility to bear witness to the reality of Jesus's victory. Justice, peace, and the integrity of creation – these things are things in which we can share and must share with people of all faiths and ideologies, whoever they may be. They are part of our common responsibility as human beings and insofar as we neglect them, we certainly contradict the gospel we preach. But that which has been committed to the church exclusively, and which no other agency will perform, is the responsibility to tell this story".*

My father, the Retired Bishop of Pittsburgh, tells the story of his early ministry as a Bishop in the Episcopal Church and one of the leaders in its renewal movement. They were in Detroit for the 69th General Convention of the Episcopal Church. One of the orders of business was to take up the resolution for the "Decade of Evangelism" for the 1990's, a renewed commitment to evangelism, and witness promoted by my father and other evangelically-minded leaders of the church.

It was an unlikely resolution to succeed, based on the negative sentiments of the church about world mission and evangelism. However, the measure was placed on the last day of the two-week convention when a number of delegates were already headed out of town or hurriedly packing to leave. As a result, the measure ended up passing fairly easily, with no debate, and nary a 'nay'.

Later that afternoon, my father decided to take the elevator up to the top floor of the Marriott, where the Convention had been held, to take one last view of the City before leaving. As the elevator was heading up, it stopped at a floor and a man entered the elevator. As the doors closed and the elevator continued up, the man exclaimed, "Oh, I thought we were heading down". My father replied; "No, we are heading up. You might as well join me and take in the view of the City."

My father was still dressed in his clericals. The man was dressed in fancy slacks and shoes, an open collar shirt with the top three buttons open, a gold chain

necklace, and hair slicked back. He was obviously ready for the evening.

The elevator doors opened and the man headed for the bar while my father went to the windows to take in the sunset views of Detroit and Canada across the river. When he turned toward the elevators to head back down, the man asked my father to join him for a drink. My father who had no desire to engage with this man, let alone have a drink with him, declined. The man responded, "Father, certainly you can have a Coke with me." My father, still uncomfortable with this man, said. "Well, OK".

The man told my father, "You know I had not planned to come up here, but your elevator brought me up, not down. I'm afraid I am caught up in sin." My father, still not really wanting to have anything to do with this man, said with little empathy, "Yes, I can see that, and it is in that glass you're drinking there."

"Father, I was about to go out and meet a woman who is not my wife and I have two daughters at home as well."

My father, still discomfited and wanting to extricate himself as soon as possible, said "You have a wife and daughters at home, and you are here sinning, without a care for them. You are destroying your relationships, your family, and your life."

"I know", replied the man. "But I cannot let go of the idea that before I stepped on your elevator, I did not understand what I was doing, and now I am up here with you talking about my family. God put you here with me for a reason."

My father's heart suddenly melted. He asked the man if he knew that Jesus died to save men from their sins, to save him from his sins, and to accept this gift, they simply needed to turn their hearts to Jesus.

My father asked the man if he would like to invite Jesus into his heart.

The man said he did, and, together, they prayed the prayer for Jesus to take over his life, a confession of sins, and the Lord's prayer. And as the prayers were said, the tears began to flow not just for the man, but my father as well. They parted with an embrace. I don't believe my father ever learned the man's name.

As my father was descending in the elevator, he was suddenly aware of a voice speaking in his head.

"Alden, you think the business of evangelism is doing the business of the church and passing grand resolutions to be more evangelical. I tell you evangelism is you being present and ready when I send to you those who need it most."

When I think of this story, I am reminded that evangelism isn't some program or committee that is in charge of one part of the church, the way, say the Altar Guild is in charge of the flowers and dressings for the Altar...or the vergers are in charge of assisting the clergy to keep order in the service...or the men's ministry is in charge of breakfast, trunk or treat, and the men's retreat...or even the clergy in

charge of the ministry of the church and the spiritual health and guidance of the parish.

Evangelism is each one of us prepared to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ crucified and raised from the dead for all men to live, forgiven, in new lives in Jesus. As Bishop Newbegin said, it is our responsibility as the church, and we are the church, to share Jesus's story of redemption for all men.

As Hebrews 10:23 has directed, God has given us eternal life through his Son, Jesus. In response, we should not waver on the good news but challenge each other to love our neighbor, do good deeds and share the good news to those seeking. Sharing the gospel is the ultimate good deed. This is evangelism.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your Son, Jesus Christ, and for his sacrificial gift of reconciliation to you and eternal life. Teach us daily to accept your gift of love in our own lives, and out of thanksgiving, to share your love and the saving grace available to all people. In these things we give you all praise and glory. In Jesus's name we pray ... **Amen.**

