

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God of all people, every new day is a chance to live a stronger faith, a more committed and disciplined life, an opportunity to strengthen ourselves for the work ahead. We come to this place not because we want to come to church but because we are the church when we are together. We have designated this building as your house, and it only becomes the church when we are here in community, prepared for worship in heart, and ready for service in body. We bring all of ourselves, those parts fully alive, ready to show those around us, and those parts that are hidden and broken. We recognize we carry all these things in our hearts, and we lift them up to you. As we gather in the spirit of community, we bring all of ourselves to you, those things we partake in joy, those things we mourn over, and put them in your hands, God of all.

Holy God, we understand that this journey of living and sharing the Gospel is not an easy one. Our world preaches that we cut corners, but when we truly honor and love your people, to cut corners is to treat our neighbors not like neighbors. This life of evangelism is a life dedicated to you, and that has consequences on how we should live. As we seek to embody this life of preaching the Gospel really and truly, help us recognize that it all begins with a life rooted in you. We recognize our responsibility, not an overestimating or underestimating how we live with you in our lives. Let us truly discern and learn what that means through all parts of our lives. We pray to be like Jesus Christ, the one anointed and rooted in a life with you, Gracious God, who taught us to pray together, saying...

SERMON

I'm a pretty great guy, just so you know. I've only been here for a little over a year, but I'm quite the pastor. So, let me tell you about my sermons. I do them all quite well, if I

may say so myself. No one really helps me with them. I don't let Catherine read them ahead of time, but I wrap myself into my little writing shell and take care of them efficiently. I pick up my bible and study it carefully, and then I crank out a sermon that is totally awesome. Ya know, I'm pretty good at this whole pastoring thing. I'm glad I made a profession out of it; aren't you?

I think I would be horrified if I really just said that and meant it. It's too self-absorbed and taking far too much credit for things that are done as a community. I count that I said some variant of "I" or "me" in that little paragraph about 16 times. Sure, I am the one who got an education to move into this calling, but it's not all about me. I work with someone greater to craft these sermons. When they are presented, you are not the sole listener; someone greater works with you to help learn, discern, and take some things away that might be applicable to you later. It's not just about the individual; we work in partnership. We do not do it alone, because the Christian life is never about "alone."

So, evangelism. We're getting a new picture now. We leave behind the images that put down, that enforce, that make other people what we want them to be. We began with the idea that "It's not about results," for God grows the seeds; we plant them. Evangelism is not a "drive-by" proposition, for "it begins with friendship." We make friends, not converts. When we do share, we "share our stories and ourselves," with our personal stories of God working in our lifetimes, lives that live out the faith we claim, and the authentic joy of a life with God. What are we missing? All of these things have to do with how we act. Indeed, we must be very intentional with how we act as we evangelize. However, we must put our trust not in our actions but in whom we serve. Our fourth and final phrase is "We are rooted in God." We live our lives in and for God. If we look at it well, we'll recognize this

undergirds all three of our previous messages. They work because of how God works in and with us. Let's see how God makes evangelism as we take apart our scripture lessons and see how they craft a message for our lives and for our time.

Our examples and understanding of evangelism must come from Jesus, and a lot is gained from his main expression of what it means to share the Gospel. Our first scripture lesson, as it has been throughout this series, is Jesus' Great Commission from Matthew. We hold onto it as not only our mission of evangelism, but our guide. In it, Christ confirms that our calling is to go out and make disciples of all nations, recognizing that he is with us throughout it all. This passage frames our responsibility and calling to be evangelists in this world. Hopefully, throughout this series, we have crafted something entirely different than those negative thoughts that come to mind. When Jesus says, "Make disciples," that does not mean "make converts," to me. That's not relationship, which is who Christ is above all. "Make disciples" calls me to be in relationship, for discipleship is about doing, not simply about being. It's about teaching and learning all along the way. But what is most important about this passage is how Jesus frames what he says. Firstly, he says, "All authority on earth and heaven has been given to me." He gives his instructions to us in the middle, and ends with "And I am with you always, even to the end of the age." The bookends to Jesus' Great Commission are a statement of Jesus' authority and how Jesus will always be with us. The Great Commission begins and ends with God's authority and presence. Evangelism begins and ends with God! It's not only about us and what we do. It's about where we are rooted. And, of course, faithful evangelism begins and ends when "We are rooted in God."

Our second scripture lesson comes from the beginning of Jesus' ministry, the very start of the public ministry after he made his way out of the wilderness. He comes to the synagogue on the Sabbath, which is Saturday, as do all good Jews. He stands up to speak, and is given the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. It's not clear whether he asked for the scroll or was just given it, but what he says is by no means an accident. He quotes Isaiah in dramatic fashion. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." In academics, when we write a paper, we begin with something called a thesis statement. The thesis statement sets out the idea of the work to come. It indicates what one sets out to prove and how one will do it. It is where we tell everyone what will happen through the course of our work. I want to call this passage Jesus' thesis statement of the ministry to come. This is what he will prove; this is what he will do. This sets the tone for everything else to follow, and it all comes right back to this statement. This is the foundation of Jesus' ministry in the coming years. "This has been fulfilled in your hearing," he says.

It means something for us too. Jesus chooses this scripture intentionally. It wasn't the Lectionary reading for the week. This had a message he needed to share. And what did he share? It begins where we should begin: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor." He could have begun anywhere, but his message gives us a flavor of what is required of us. If we just look at this sentence grammatically, there are two independent clauses: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me" is one. The second is "He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor." If we remember grammar, every sentence has a subject, verb, and direct object. The subject is the actor, the

verb is the action, and the direct object is the one being acted upon. The subject of both sentences refers to God. The Direct Object of both sentences, the one being acted upon, in both sentences is Jesus. In Jesus' ministry, the one who acts is God, and Jesus is the one whom God acts with and through. This is amazing. And we can use this as the thesis statement for our own ministry as well. God is the actor, and we are the ones God acts with and through. We are the ones empowered for ministry by God.

If our evangelism doesn't have the background of being "rooted in God," we are destined to fail. This world has some really bad ideas about responsibility. Either we fully own responsibility or we disown things sent our way. Both can be used well, and both can be abused when we work with God. There is the under reliance on God. If I think that the sermon is all my responsibility and I do not meditate and reflect on how God is speaking to me and through me, then I am overestimating my responsibility. I'm making it more about me. I'm chasing my own tail, doing it for my glory, and not for God's glory. On the other hand, there is the misdirected over-reliance on God. If I figure that God's gonna move when I stand up here and deliver a sermon and provide the sermon for me...I'm pretty sure that we'll all be disappointed. God doesn't just take us over, but God works with us. Being rooted in God is the faithful balance between the two. When we are rooted in God, we recognize that God is the beginning and the end, but God calls us to responsibility as well, just like the Great Commission. We come to church, we study the bible, we learn about God because we are to be equipped when God calls us, in the moment or over a lifetime. We work with God to fulfill the calling of God. We are never left alone, but we don't pass the buck.

Here's the thing: if we are rooted in God through scripture, prayer, and community, we will want to evangelize faithfully. How that mixes best for you is up to you and God, for we all connect to God with a different mix of these. But we will all know that God is the beginning and the end with us working for God's purposes. We will see other people as God's blessed children and treat them as such. There is subtle danger, though. If we see them as a means to glorify God, maybe we aren't seeking God's glory. If we want to make as many converts as possible for God's Kingdom as soon as possible, we may find that we are really seeking our own glory. You know when this happens when we see things from the other's perspective. Think about the feeling you get when you see evangelism in stereotypical ways. It makes you feel all creepy...with good reason. You aren't engaging; you're selling. When we focus on God, we'll not be selling. We'll be sharing a piece of ourselves that means something so special that we have a hard time not sharing it lovingly.

As we wrap this series up, let's review: "It's not about results." "It begins with friendship." "We share our stories and ourselves." And today, "We are rooted in God." It's just that easy. It's just that hard. I can say it to you right now as clear as day. On the other hand, it takes a lifetime to figure out, even when we dig as deeply as possible. This is only the beginning as we sort out how we can be evangelists in our own unique ways in a world that is so utterly complicated we have a hard time figuring it out. It requires that we constantly look at our actions through the lens of relationship, which is the way that we recognize how Christ treated us. With that, we move with love, and when we move with love, we move with God. When we move with God, we move with love. Those are inseparable. We continually pray for God's learning, discerning, and companionship as we walk this complicated road. Thanks be to God! Amen and Amen.