

“Shhh! The ‘E’ Word”

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Luke 15:1-10

CHILDREN’S TIME

I have a great collection of stuffed toys here. They are Qwynn’s. They are all different shapes and sizes. Animals are my favorites. I wanted to show them to you.

Oh, my! I seem to have lost one of them. I know I had it when I got here this morning. Would you help me look for it?

Thank you so much for helping me find the lost toy. Even though Qwynn has quite a few of them, every one is very important to her and I would be very upset if one of them was lost.

That reminds me of a lesson that Jesus taught to a group of religious leaders one day. The religious leaders were very upset that Jesus was often hanging out with sinners. He was even sometimes seen eating with them. The religious leaders didn't like that at all and were very critical of Jesus. Jesus told them a story to help them to understand.

“Suppose one of you had a hundred sheep and you lost one of them,” Jesus said. “Wouldn’t you leave all the others who were safe, and go search for the lost sheep? And when you found the lost one, wouldn’t you joyfully put it on your shoulders and carry it back home? Wouldn’t you be so happy that you would tell all of your friends about finding the lost sheep?”

I imagine that all of the religious leaders had to agree that they would do just as Jesus had suggested. Then Jesus said to them, “In the same way, there is more rejoicing in Heaven over one person who finds God’s love than over 100 people who already know God.”

The Bible teaches us that we are all like sheep, and sometimes people stray away from God, and get lost. That makes God very sad, but God still loves them and keeps searching for them. We can help God by sharing love with all people. God wants all people to know God, even sending Jesus, to find those who are lost.

Aren't you glad that God doesn't give up on any of the lost sheep? I sure am!

SERMON

Today we are talking about the “E” word, related to growing in our faith and following Jesus. This is the word that must not be spoken or else people will be repelled and run for the hills.

What we are talking about is a sharing faith in a way that isn’t fraught with the notion of standing on the street corner on a soap box to proclaim the Gospel.

It is not a bait-and-switch strategy for church growth where we rally people in the door with slick production and entertainment, and then once we have them captive, we hit them with the Bible.

And it is not manipulation through fear with the purpose of saving souls from Hell for God and getting them into Heaven.

These methods and others like them ring of inauthenticity, which people outside the church see with razor sharp clarity.

Certainly we need a new model for sharing faith than what has been called and practiced as *whisper* “evangelism.”

But first let’s talk about church growth. Often, when we talk about the “E” word, we are interested in

growing the church by including unchurched people.

I recently read an article that listed the top five lies we like to tell ourselves about church growth. I’ll share two of them. The first lie we tell ourselves is that **friendly churches grow**.

Most churches report that their church is friendly. Even when they are declining in membership, they still feel this is their strength when it comes to growing.

Now it is true that new people are more likely to stick around when a congregation is friendly. However, what being a friendly church often means is that first-time guests are more likely to see the backs of regular attenders’ heads as they gather around one other, leaving them on the outside, not feeling very welcome.

The second lie we like to tell ourselves about church growth is that **our church wants to grow**. This is the most innocent of all the lies we tell ourselves.

We like the idea of our numbers growing, however, the reality is that church growth is full of hard work and sacrifice. It includes not a little bit of inconvenience. In order to really grow a congregation, the people need to realize it will require

them to let go of certain things and do some uncomfortable new things.

One of those uncomfortable things that growing churches do is share their lives and faith authentically with people who are not part of the church.

I don't know about you, but back in the 1980s when I grew up in the church, the youth group was my whole social circle. We would get together on Sunday mornings, in the middle of the week to play basketball, head out to a movie together, or hang out at someone's house playing cards. We were always together.

We had a good size youth group and it was an amazing experience, but when I look back, I also recognize that the group never really grew throughout my four years of high school.

When the only people you talk with or hang out with are from an inner circle or people already in the church, then there will not be anyone to invite.

Churches that don't have a lot of contact with unchurched people often rely on advertising, creating big events to draw new people, or even waiting for new people to

walk in the doors on Sunday morning.

These are indicators of declining churches that are preparing to close their doors!

No, the #1 way that churches grow is by personal invitation — inviting people who already trust them.

So, church growth is anchored into growing relationships with people who don't attend church.

Let's examine a passage from Luke and then talk more about how church growth and sharing faith fit together.

READ LUKE 15:1-10

The parables in this passage are founded on the Jewish belief that there are two worlds, or two halves that fit together to make up the whole. These two worlds are Earth and Heaven. They are designed to be in harmony with one another, but we realize they are not.

That is why Jesus taught his disciples to pray that it might be "on Earth as it is in Heaven." Once we discover what it is like in Heaven then we have a picture of what God meant for it to be like on Earth.

So, in the New Testament we have lots of stories of Jesus sharing with people “The kingdom of Heaven is like...” Jesus wanted people to understand what Heaven was about so that they might help make this world like it.

Heaven is by nature in sync with God’s will, and our work is to help God bring Earth into alignment with Heaven so that both will ring and sing together with God’s purpose.

Jesus’ life and ministry is one place where things on Earth are wonderfully in sync with Heaven. This is why it is so important for us to know those stories of Jesus from Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

The Pharisees of the Jesus’ day had a very difficult time reconciling this reality because their picture of Heaven was based on a legal code, purity laws, restrictions, and permissions that made up the ways of Temple life.

In the first parable, there is a shepherd with 100 sheep. All of the sheep are loved by God, but one gets lost. The shepherd goes and finds it and then throws a party for all his friends to celebrate.

The second parable is like it. A woman loses a coin and then scours the house and finds it. She

also throws a party for all her friends and neighbors to celebrate.

In both of these stories a party was thrown. Jesus was saying that this is what is happening in Heaven when one person who was lost is now found in God’s love.

To be in sync with Heaven, we’d also have a party here on Earth when people are found in God’s love.

We can look to the life and ministry of Jesus to see Heaven in action.

What was Jesus doing at the beginning of this passage?

Jesus was hanging out with “sinners,” the undesirables of society. And not just hanging out with them, Jesus was eating with them, which entered into a much more intimate relationship with them.

In the eyes of the Pharisees, Jesus was guilty of demonstrating hospitality and sharing intimately with people who were ritually and socially unclean and therefore not welcome in Jewish circles.

For acting against the norms of the religious establishment, Jesus was being condemned.

But wait! That is how it is done in Heaven! That is God's desire for life on Earth.

We need to go a bit deeper.

Jesus was bold not for the sake of being bold, and not because he was supposed to be bold, like in legalistic systems. Jesus did what he did because that was how things are done in Heaven.

Yes, these actions were in sync with Heaven, but what empowered Jesus to do them? The simple answer is that these actions flowed out of who Jesus was as a human being who followed God's Spirit.

Going back to church growth... If our primary goal is to have more people here and to have a bigger congregation, and to have that, we are going to share our faith with a bunch of unchurched people, I would say that our intentions are perhaps off base.

This congregation is focused on church growth. I get that. But our strategy to grow our church is not to share with a bunch of new people in order to get them to join us.

Doing that is at best misplaced intention and at worst manipulation of others for selfish gain.

Instead, sharing faith is something that flows naturally out of a life that is transformed by the Spirit of God.

If we want to share our faith well, we will grow ourselves to become like Jesus and pray for God to lead us into authentically sharing our life with others.

Sharing faith is not a program we establish in the church. Instead, it is a way of life — living and sharing God's love in the world. It is our culture.

This gets at the heart of sharing our faith, or Godbearing, as author Elaine Robinson describes in her book of the same name.

I'm not sure that God wants us to do any of the things that Jesus did only because Jesus did them. That would be following another law. God is interested in something more.

God wants our hearts to be changed and brought into alignment with God's Spirit, that the things we do and say will reflect God's Spirit into the world.

This is Godbearing. We bear the renewing image of God within us and express it by bearing God to others, and bearing with God the suffering of others.

Bartolome De Las Casas was born in Spain in 1484 and traveled to Latin America on Christopher Columbus' second expedition. He trained to be a priest and was the primary missionary to convert the natives.

Las Casas enjoyed a life of privilege and comfort as a result of the natives whom he both had as slaves and worked diligently to convert to Christianity.

As Las Casas became more and more open to God's Spirit, he became increasingly uncomfortable with the Spanish colonial system of dominance, and in 1514 he experienced a "profound conversion of conscience" and became resolved, against all odds, to make his world more like the Heaven that was being revealed to him by God.

At first he stood alone against the colonial Spanish establishment and system of slavery.

He set his slaves free, and began advocating on behalf of all native peoples, sacrificing his own position of affluence and privilege.

Las Casas spoke against the system that exploited human beings for riches and power, and asserted that all were made in the image of God.

Some say he articulated the first language of modern day human rights, and was a forerunner in what would become, 400 years later, the liberation movement of the 1960s.

Las Casas was a Godbearer, carrying within himself the renewing image of God. From this vantage point, he saw all people regardless of race, culture or language as made in God's image and of great value.

Are we willing to allow God's grace and love to change us from within to re-pattern our hearts so that we are in sync with Heaven like Las Casas?

When we do, following Jesus will make all the sense in the world.

From a place of inner transformation, we will be led to act, like Jesus, with radical hospitality and share in radical relationship with people who do not yet know God.