

Date: March 12, 2023 (Third Sunday in Lent)

1. Texts: Exodus 17:1-7; Ps. 95; Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42.
2. Subject: evangelism.
3. Topic: effective evangelism.
4. Aim: challenge.
5. Proposition: "Inclusivity created the opportunity for effective evangelism."

## EFFECTIVE EVANGELISM

Inclusivity opened the door to evangelism, which led to a measurable growth in the number of people experiencing salvation. That's this entire sermon in one sentence. We will benefit, however, from going deeper into effective evangelism.

We start with the horrible relationship between Samaritans and Jews. It was always bad. Their religious practices are closely related. They split apart, likely at the point of the Babylonian Exile. But despite their similarities, they were rivals and enemies. At one point the high priest in Jerusalem raised an army to besiege the capital of Samaria and destroyed their temple. The relationship between the two cultures was bad.

Then, we have a Jewish culture that is chauvinistic if not downright misogynistic. Women are viewed as clearly subordinate to men. In today's story we have a *Samaritan* woman speaking with a *Jewish* rabbi. The relationship at the root of today's story couldn't be much worse—unless, of course, it had been a pagan Roman prostitute who was speaking to Jesus.

Much has been written about the Samaritan woman, about her problematical marriages and her current common-law spouse. Yes, it is likely that she came out to the well in the middle of the day—the hottest part of the day—because she wanted to avoid all the gossip about herself. But Jesus didn't seem to care. He didn't condemn her or even forgive her. He used his divinely inspired knowledge as an entry point for evangelism. He used his knowledge to break down the barriers to evangelism.

So, here we see a Jewish rabbi speaking with a Samaritan woman, contrary to the understandings and practices of both Jews and Samaritans. In the course

of the conversation, Jesus revealed his true identity to the woman, in a way that he had never done before. The result of this was that the woman herself was effectively evangelized, and she moved on to evangelize others. Jesus didn't care that she was a Samaritan or a woman or had a troubled history. He revealed himself to her, and she came to know him as the expected Messiah.

The foundation of effective evangelism is inclusivity, a welcoming love and acceptance that rejects judgment. This helps to establish a relationship that can bear the weight of evangelism. A keen insight into the lives of others supports and guides effective evangelism.

In the Diocese of Athabasca, this understanding of effective evangelism is most likely to be required with three groups of people:

1. First Nations;
2. the unhoused;
3. our friends and neighbours.

With each sector, we have to practice inclusivity, develop relationships and employ whatever insights we can with respect to the people we know.

It would seem that inclusivity might be the most problematic with groups one and two, the First Nations and the unhoused. We are called upon by God to surrender our anxiety and fear when interacting with all people, let alone those whose lifestyle and culture might be different from our own. We are to enter into genuine conversations, assuming and believing the best about others.

This first difficulty will also make building relationships difficult. The temptation will be to treat both First Nations and the unhoused with a kind of disdain. We might seek to treat them paternalistically, assuming that we have the right answers to all their problems. Economic, social and cultural superiority often come into play when dealing with these two sectors of society.

But we cannot hope to help bring Jesus into the lives of others, if our relationships are unequal, paternalistic or manipulative. If we are to employ whatever insights we have, we have to let go of our assumptions and prejudices.

On the surface, it would seem that effective evangelism might be easiest with our friends and neighbours. While there might well be less fear, there certainly is anxiety. Our friends and neighbours won't attack us or try to manipulate us. But they might reject us and dismiss our demonstration of faith as childish. They might believe us to be weak-minded because we go to Church. They might repeat a long list of crimes committed in the name of the Church, thereby implying that every Church member is also a criminal.

Even with our friends and neighbours, we have to practice inclusivity, which we've defined as a welcoming love that rejects judgment. This is not easy if you stand on the opposite side of a political or moral discussion. But it is exactly such inclusivity that Jesus practiced with the Samaritan woman at the well.

In that atmosphere of inclusivity, we build relationships over which the message of salvation may travel.

The message of salvation must be framed in a vocabulary and style that the other person can easily understand and, if it should come to that, accept. This is where we employ whatever insights we have. Male dominated and chauvinistic language doesn't work with a woman whose father abused her. Treating addiction or gender identity as a lifestyle choice will turn a person away from God. We have to look into the soul of the other person, if we are to support them as they make sense of the message of salvation.

It is at such a stage that our evangelism becomes effective. This is only true, if we remember that evangelism is merely the proclamation in word and deed of the message of salvation. Evangelism doesn't always result in repentance and faith. Effective evangelism is not measured by the number of people who attend Church. To be effective in evangelism is to so present the crucified and risen Christ that others can make a balanced choice about their own salvation.

With that realization, our minds are effectively "blown". The effective evangelist doesn't keep a tally of how many new converts he or she has created. The effective evangelist pays attention to the relationships he or she has established. The effective evangelist learns to walk in the shoes of other people.

The effective evangelist develops compassion, empathy and a broad spiritual vocabulary.

In the long run, the effective evangelist serves as an extension of Christ's hands, voice and love. The evangelist doesn't convert anyone—only God does. The evangelist doesn't convince anyone—only the individual can decide. The evangelist merely shares the love of Jesus in ways that the other person can appreciate and, if they should so choose, accept for themselves.

Inclusivity opened the door to evangelism, which led to a measurable growth in the number of people experiencing salvation. That's our sermon in one sentence. But we really needed all the following sentences in order to make sense out of it.

AMEN.