

Sunday, June 2, 2024  
“Lifestyle Evangelism”  
The Reverend Virginia Courtney

I want to begin this morning by addressing something that cannot be ignored. The text says that Philip was told by an angel to head south out of Jerusalem to Gaza. Around the world, we are hearing about Jerusalem and Gaza and the horrific things that have been taking place there. The unfathomable tragedy. The brutal loss of civilian lives. The humanitarian crises. We have a variety of opinions on the source of the problem and the solutions. We have strong opinions about injustice and inhumanity. Protests, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, political discord, and hopelessness are rampant. I don't know you well enough yet to assume to speak about what is happening, but I hope that we might all take a moment of silence to pray for peace. Thank you.

Now, if it's possible, I'd like to pivot and make a very different assumption. Does this congregation know the Kevin Costner film, “Field of Dreams”? The one about the baseball field in the middle of an Iowa cornfield that lets disgraced baseball players from days gone by play the game they love again?

The mysterious voice in the corn says, “If you build it, he will come.” And so a struggling farmer plows up his crop and builds a ballfield and the bank comes close to repossessing the farm before the young daughter assures her father that people will feel compelled to how up. And then James Earl Jones, in his perfect baritone voice gives a speech that went something like this.

Ray, people will come, Ray.

They'll come to church for reasons they can't even fathom. They'll turn up your driveway, not knowing for sure why they're doing it. They'll arrive at your door as innocent as children, longing for the past.

“Of course, we won't mind if you look around,” you'll say. “It's only twenty dollars per person.” They'll pass over the money without even thinking about it. For it is money they have and peace they lack.

And they'll walk out to the pews, and sit in shirts sleeves on a perfect morning. They'll find they have reserved seats somewhere along one of the pews, where they sat when they were children and cheered their heroes. And they'll watch the service, and it'll be as if they'd dipped themselves in magic waters. The memories will be so thick, they'll have to brush them away from their faces.

People will come, Ray.

The one constant through all the years, Ray, has been church.

America has rolled by like an army of steamrollers. It's been erased like a blackboard, rebuilt, and erased again. But church has marked the time.

This church, this worship – it's a part of our past, Ray. It reminds us of all that once was good, and it could be again.

Ohhhhhh, people will come, Ray. People will most definitely come.

And as the cameras pan away from the field, we see headlights, a long stretch of headlights, driving up toward Ray's house. People are coming. The story has a happy ending.

That film was released in 1989 and of course, the speech is about baseball, not church, but for those of us who are still committed to the church, we believe that people will come. And so we have turned away from the pragmatists who say it's just a matter of time before Christianity becomes a relic and most of the churches are sold and repurposed. Even as memberships dwindle and budgets get tighter, we have remained. We keep the church running, because we're sure that one of these days, the people will come. They won't be able to help themselves. They'll just get up on a Sunday morning and be compelled to come back.

But the truth is . . . that's pretty unlikely. Now, don't give up on me. I'm not like the banker in the story trying to get Ray to sell the farm and quit his dream. But the reality is that church attendance isn't going to magically increase on its own. People will NOT most definitely come.

So what do we do? How do we get people to cross the threshold of a sanctuary door? Are we called to evangelize?

We have a great example of evangelism in our scripture today, don't we? Phillip was minding his own business when he was told by an angel to head south, so he does. He's very responsive to the spirit. And he finds an Ethiopian eunuch in a chariot, looking puzzled by what he's reading in a scroll, so he takes that as an invitation to engage, and sure enough, the Ethiopian has questions and is excited by the answers. And he rejoices, even after Philip vanishes into thin air. Me, I would have freaked out if Philip was baptizing me and then was "snatched" by the spirit of the Lord. But good for the Ethiopian. I'm happy for him.

But if that's what evangelism is, then I'm not an evangelist. I'm not the kind of person who approaches strangers and ask them if they've heard of Jesus. I'm more reserved about how I approach strangers. I certainly don't climb into the chariots of others and get into their personal space. My parents taught me better than that, and they're Baptists!

And I know how it feels to be on the receiving end of public-evangelism-by-stranger. I've been asked, several times, "If you died today, do you know if you'd go to heaven or hell?" And even though I'm an ordained minister of the gospel, I don't feel comfortable striking up a conversation with the person who asked, especially since I'm a young, short haired, female minister. It's sad to say I often have concerns about how an evangelical person would respond to me, if I told them, I am a minister.

So how do we get people to church? Well, it's not just about building a church and expecting people to come, or building a website and expecting people to log on, or building a cool program and expecting people to attend. Because there's been a shift in our culture. For centuries, we lived in what is known as the age of association, a time in which people in a society voluntarily organized themselves into clubs, groups, denominations, and charitable efforts. Being a part of a group gave you a sense of identity and belonging. You had emotional and social connections. You had business and professional resources. Family legacies were tied to affiliation with these groups.

But in the last 50 or so years, that paradigm has been falling apart. We are now in a new age. The age of authenticity. No longer do young people want to be labeled and identified with an organizational ethic. Dr. Dwight Zscheile (Sch-EE-le) from Luther Seminary says, “In the Age of Authenticity, the focus is on discovering and expressing one’s true self. Institutions are seen suspiciously—as confining at best to one’s journey of self-discovery and oppressive at worst (as indeed many have been).” In the Age of Authenticity, individuals avoid voluntary associations and membership in institutions. And it’s not just the church. Countless voluntary organizations like unions, scouts, and PTA, and other clubs are facing precipitous declines in membership and participation. This is much larger than the church.

So, how does the church remain the church if young people don’t want anything to do with “organized religion”?

Are you ready for this? We have to stop preserving and protecting the institution and focus on what I call “lifestyle evangelism.” It’s about living authentically and cultivating the fruits of the spirit. People are hungry for meaning, purpose, love, hope, and community. They want to be seen, and they want to be fully themselves. The majority of Americans do believe in a divine being, and we do have THE Good News for the world. But judgment, violence, greed, abuse, hypocrisy, misogyny, racism, and even the hesitation to accept scientific discoveries have driven them away. It reminds me of what a reporter said to Mahatma Gandhi in an interview once. The reporter said, “You quote Jesus Christ frequently, so why do you reject Christianity?” Gandhi replied, “Oh, I don't reject Christ. I love Christ. It's just that so many of you Christians are so unlike Christ.”

But imagine if your calling as a Christian was not to evangelize like Philip but to practice lifestyle evangelism. To live authentically. To simply join people where life is being lived in today’s world, form relationships, listen to their longings and losses, cultivate community, serve your neighbors in need, and draw deeply on your experiences as a Christian to help them make spiritual meaning. Imagine if this spiritual work, this lifestyle evangelism, modeling your life after Christ, was the primary way to evangelize. It’s a high standard, but it’s what’s going to work these days. Be real. Get to know people. Share what’s gotten you through the hard times. Share your favorite memories of Christmas Eve services and that funny story the pastor told on Sunday and how your church showed up to help when you needed it.

Now, I want to share some personal things with you. When I began ministry as a hospice chaplain, I was ordained into a progressive Baptist denomination. But I transferred my ordination from a Baptist denomination to the PC(USA) for several reasons. First, I could be authentically myself in the PC(USA). I can’t ask anyone to practice authentic lifestyle evangelism if a major part of my life was closeted. Second, because I believe in the denomination’s intentional balancing of tradition and progressive social justice, and third its balance of individual church identity and collaborative strength; but more importantly, I am here today because I believe in you. I

want to join you in the ways in which you love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength and love your neighbors as yourselves. I want to say to people at grocery stores and Habitat builds and my children's school events that I'm a part of Dunn's Corners Community Church and see them light up when they say, "Oh! I know that church! That's the church that was there for the family of Maddie Potts. The church that builds Habitat Houses. That's where I did my grief support group, or that's the church that helps refugee families by setting up apartments."

I'd love to join you, because the world needs you right now to provide an alternative narrative to the loud messaging of what has been labeled as "evangelical Christianity." To brag about mission projects and community service on social media pages and at water coolers. The church needs you to be vulnerable and tell someone about a time you needed your church community and they were there for you.

The majority of us aren't gifted in evangelism as it has come to be known - the Phillip model of approaching a stranger in the wilderness and sharing your faith. Even if the Holy Spirit nudged me, I don't know if I'd have the courage to climb into any stranger's chariot these days.

But the world needs good news. Social media and cable news and even local news is just full of depressing, fear-invoking headlines and video clips, and the good news is that Jesus Christ came to earth and walked around this equally miserable and amazing world and showed us how to live with love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and goodness, and faithfulness, and self-control. People aren't going to come back to church just because we built a pretty building, but I'm convinced they'll come back if we live authentic, compassionate, vulnerable, generous lives that are modeled after Jesus because we live in a time when people are desperate to make meaning of their lives and the ever-changing world around them. It's not as easy as asking a stranger if they know Jesus and then disappearing into thin air, but when has Christianity ever been about doing things the easy way? We are called to tell the world about Jesus. Let us not be arrogant or ashamed. As St. Francis of Assisi is credited with saying, "Preach the Gospel at all times. When necessary, use words." It's never been about the words, friends. It's about our very lives. That's how we evangelize and share the good news. Amen.