

“HOW SHALL WE COUCH THE INVITATION?”

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I begin with two stories around our Matthew theme of sharing the gospel. One radiates light, the other reveals shadows. Story number one. During our search for a youth minister, we had a few fine candidates, but none as exemplary as Justin.

I recall Justin’s interview. Aware not only that we were interviewing him, but he was also interviewing us--I invited our people to say what FCC means to them. One lady observed that while Fairfield County is a lovely place, its values can be at odds with her own. She mentioned how materialism and status make some people feel inferior. She described the FCC, Darien is an oasis of deeper meaning and belonging. She said this is where she comes to remember who she is, and to access the better angels of her nature. She said it was impossible for her to live in Darien without FCC. This spiritual home is where her soul finds its rest.

That blew me away. I didn’t say anything until afterward. I told her how her words touched me. She lit up the room. If we feel as she does about FCC, Darien, and never tell anyone, it’s like never saying “I love you” to the child you cherish. We tend to dwell upon evangelism as abusive, disrespectful and manipulative. That’s how we excuse ourselves for never inviting anyone to share what we enjoy here.

But if you want to understand what sharing the good news in Christ looks like at its best, take a long look at this lady, my friends: a heartfelt, honest, and humble invitation. Evangelism is one hungry person telling another where to find bread.

This isn’t to say that the work of sharing good news is easy in this modern world. Story number two. After finishing our work trip to the DR, Cecile and I went to a resort. We did nothing for two days. By nothing, I mean we floated on a raft, up and down a serpentine pool, basking in the sun and grinning. We met a couple from Great Britain. He was a physicist and she was in business. We introduced ourselves, a pastor and a doctor. We mentioned the just-ended Habitat work trip. Despite that she introduced herself as an atheist and he as a disenchanted Catholic, they kept directing our little chat back to faith and its related truth claims

“Why can’t those people build their own homes, anyway?” he grumbled. I could not let that pass. In so many words, I said because our likes were born on third base and ‘those people’ were born with two strikes and Justin Verlander pitching.

Surprisingly, he accepted that. She said she it was enough to be a good and nice person. The world is filled with nice people, and she is one. That was her religion. I told her she seemed lovely, but asked how that explained what is happening in Syria right now. About 100,000 good and nice people are killing each other there.

The physicist was kindly, but condescending. He *wanted* to believe in God. Truly he did. But we lack real evidence. So what is wrong with you church people? he shrugged, as if to say, 'how can belief be expected of a person as smart as me?' I reminded him that 300 years before Jesus, Plato said, "No serious thing can be proven." What does that mean? he said. He couldn't prove his mother loved him, for example. I could play the same doubt-game there, and proof is no help. But if she didn't love him a much lesser man would stand before me than the one I saw

As we parted, I noticed surrounding faces, glistening with Aveeno SPF30, leaning forward in chaise lounges, eager to catch random bits of our cordial chat. I never argue with anyone about faith, because everyone loses in a religious argument. But I gladly share good news with the curious. The good news that God in Christ refuses to give up on us, and so there's no good reason for us to give up on God.

I know you find yourself in like situations. I don't expect you to theologize in pools with those clutching pina coladas. It's too much. But I do expect you invite others here. And guess what? If you do, you do the work of an evangelist. Two ladies, Lindsay Westbrook and Ana DeNoyer, have been willing to say, "Come and see." Not, I know more than you. Not, you are going to hell. But, *come and see*. They bring more newcomers into our faith fellowship than anyone else at FCC, Darien.

That British couple embodied typical challenges to sharing the Gospel today. Today I rehearse three familiar ones. The first is separating faith from belief. Maybe you've heard some use the word faith as an innate, universal human sensibility we all have. To care deeply about something--say, the plight of pandas--is "faith".

You don't need to believe anything. Sociologist Robert Bellah first noticed this in the '80s. He interviewed a young nurse named Sheila. "My faith has carried me a long way," she said. "It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice...try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. Take care of each other. I think he would want us to." The British pool lady reminded me of Sheila's fluffy "faith." Some view Christianity as a human construct. But I don't see humans as capable of the radical idea of a poor crucified carpenter as savior. Only God would be so bold, so off the charts.

Martin Luther hailed Christian faith as "the external word", or in Latin, "extra nos." Faith doesn't come from within, it comes from without. None of us is born Christian, somebody has to recite the stories of Jesus to shape us. Someone has to suggest he is more than a teacher, but worthy of being followed, like in Matthew.

Paul wrote (Rom. 10.17), "So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ." As for me, as people speak in grandiloquent tones about their "faith", but they lack any sacred texts, they lack any community that gathers, and they can't name specific basic practices, I edge toward the exit. Any faith in God deserving of the name demands something more than hanging a crystal from a car mirror or having a Chinese character tattooed on your back.

The second challenge relates to a false sense of freedom afoot in our day. We moderns are infatuated with choice. By that, I mean we freight our meaning upon things we choose. Human life is the sum of all of our choices. We choose, therefore, we are. And anything we haven't self-consciously chosen is unworthy of us.

This echoes the physicist, saying, "What's wrong with them that they can't build their own houses?" The older I get, the more I realize, between nature and nurture, between DNA and being born in one place and not another, many essential matters are chosen for us. I didn't choose to be born in a home with healthy food or which valued learning any more than I chose blue eyes or this "thinning spot".

Whenever we welcome new members--and we hope to do so again soon--I read Jn. 15.16, "You didn't choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last." That means the initiative lies with God. God chose.

Scripture is not big on human choice. Yes, we choose to answer God's overtures or not. But it is not like we rationally do this. Instead we wake up and realize God has graciously invaded us to rescue us. It's really not about our journey seeking God. It is more the dawning realization that God seeks us. Will we allow God in? The God of love won't force it. The real choice here was God's not give up on us.

The third and final challenge making evangelism dicey in the minds of many is a reflexive rejection of authority. We regard even rightful authority as authoritarian. I wrote a book about this nine years ago. Search for it with my name at Amazon.com and you'll find used copies in the same internet bin as Kool and the Gang's Greatest Hits. They go for \$1.91, about a penny per page. Seriously, many reject the gospel out of hand seeing it is as a violation of their freedom. They believe it compromises them to submit to any authority outside themselves.

The question isn't whether we conform to someone or something beyond us. All of us do that. We aren't as original as we imagine. As Bob Dylan sang in the 80s, everybody serves somebody. The real question is if the somebody or something we choose to form ourselves after is authentic or fake, true or false, good or evil. Submission to the Gospel gives us the means to lay hold of our lives, lives God intended, not self-made lives. The Gospel, a story greater than we are, leads us out of ourselves and into a bigger adventure. Ask any of us who went to the DR.

When we consider the intellectual challenges embedded in modernity, it's a wonder anyone commits to Christ or willingly lives in the way of Jesus. And yet, here you are. God found a way to overcome your resistance and mine. We believe shared worship, service and life in community points us toward God. We reach this place by letting Jesus' love rule over all and by loving Jesus back. It's not about pondering lofty ideas. It's about following his way, about trying it on for size. Remembering how God made his way toward as Jesus approached those fishermen at the Sea of Galilee, shall we approach others? Each of us has that calling. And like it or not, I call that good news—for us, for them and for everyone. Amen.