

Third Weekend After Epiphany (RCL/A): "Infectious Faith"  
Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27; 1 Cor. 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23  
January 25-26, 2020  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Front page of the paper on Wednesday was a photo of Chinese schoolchildren wearing masks in a train station on their way home to celebrate the Lunar New Year. This is because of the coronavirus that has China initiating travel restrictions and that has reached the shores of the U.S. as well.

So: **can our enthusiasm for God be as contagious as that virus? Can our faith be catching??** It's not just Peter and Andrew, James and John who are called to follow Jesus and to fish for people. Jesus called them, then, to follow and "fish." Jesus calls us, now, to follow and "fish." Being a disciple literally means being a follower, which means casting a wide net of love in the name of Christ.

It's the weekend of our annual meeting, a natural time to look at numbers to gauge the health of our faith family. But **membership** is only a matter of **record**-keeping. **Discipleship** is a matter of **faith**-keeping. In Sunday School and Confirmation we teach our children and youth the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the meaning of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. But if they and we can recite the Commandments and pray the prayers but don't live them out, how are we ahead? Here's our true mission:

"Our task is to share a faith that is exciting enough to be contagious."<sup>1</sup>

*Evangelism* is the **sharing of faith**, but it is such a misunderstood (and therefore scary) term that currently we don't have anyone standing for election as second chair of our Evangelism Committee. This is ironic since our denomination, the ELCA, is the

**Evangelical** Lutheran Church in America! There was actually a big debate about what the name of this church would be when it was formed back in 1988. Some people said that the title *evangelical* would be misleading, because the still-current connotation here in the U.S. is that *evangelical* means a theologically conservative church that takes a fundamentalist approach to Scripture. Black-and-white literalism isn't consistent with our Lutheran belief that "whatever proclaims Christ," the **living** Word of God, is most important. We don't worship a book. We worship the One who is revealed in the Book. Luther described the Bible as **the manger that holds the Christ**.

*Evangelical* means "having to do with the Gospel." (The Greek word for Gospel, "good news," is *evangelium*.) Let's remember that Luther's original intent was not to **split** the Church of Rome but to **reform** it. When it became clear that the Pope and hierarchy weren't having it, weren't really open to change, he did **not** want the fledgling community he was leading to be called Lutheran, a name would be about him. He knew that everything should be about Christ, so he wanted it called *evangelical*, pointing to the Good News of Jesus Christ. His critics coined the term Lutheran as a slam against him, but the label stuck. Except in Germany. Emma Schwarz, Arno Schwarz's mom, told me that in her village in Germany there were 2 kinds of Christians: the *katolisch* (Roman Catholics) and the *evangelisch* (the Lutherans). (Tom Pfeiffer shared after I preached that his mother, Hannelore, told him that *evangelisch* is a derogatory term used for all Protestants, and *lutherisch* is the word for Lutherans in particular.)

I read an article recently about why Lutherans here in the U.S. **haven't** been as successful in church growth as some other denominations. The author reflects on the ethnic communities of Lutherans who came here from the Old Country, who continued to

worship in German or Swedish, Danish or Norwegian, Finnish, Latvian, or Estonian, and whose pastors were so busy hatching, matching and dispatching existing members that there was no time or energy left to reach out to others. Lutefisk wasn't really appealing to newcomers and outsiders didn't get the humor of Pastor Inkvist's trials and joys in *Prairie Home Companion*.

Infectious faith transcends ethnic roots and doesn't require northern European ancestry. Nationality, sexual orientation, skin color, net worth, employment status are all irrelevant. Infectious faith is about God's love writ large in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Infectious faith is lived out in love. It knows the power of forgiveness. It bears the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Our best "evangelism" is letting the Gospel govern our faith family's Life Together:

- keeping love of God and love of neighbor as our True North in decision-making;
- remembering that many blessings that come **to** us are intended to flow **through** us to others;
- acknowledging that we are here for those who aren't here yet;
- **working** and not simply **praying** that God's kingdom may come, God's will be done;
- welcoming others as we have been welcomed;
- forgiving others as we have been forgiven;
- sharing the Good News that God loves us, not because of who we are, but because of who God is;
- proclaiming that God's mercy, God's willingness to forgive, will always be greater than our ability to sin. In other words: we are justified by grace through faith, apart from the works of the Law.

**That** is "a faith that is exciting enough to be contagious," even infectious! It was in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Why not in the 21<sup>st</sup>, too?? Amen

<sup>1</sup>Douglas R.A. Hare, *Matthew (Interpretation)*, Louisville: John Knox, 1993), p. 30.