

June 18, 2017: Second Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)
Matthew 9:35-10:23: Sent Out

When people ask you where you go to church, what do you tell them? Do you say Brick Church? Or do you say the full name, Brick Reformed Church?

I usually say Brick Church. Partly because it's just easier, but mainly because the word "Reformed" can be interpreted in so many different ways.

When I first learned about the opening here I got really excited. I contacted Vanderbloemen and let them know I was interested. They thought I was a viable candidate, so they sent me this informational packet that had a lot more information about the church. As I was reading through it I came across a section that described the kind of pastor the church was looking for, one that would identify themselves as conservative and reformed. My heart sank, because I would identify myself as fairly conservative (at least theologically), but not reformed, as I understood it.

I was pretty sure that word referred to a very specific set of beliefs that I did not hold. (Disclaimer) I did some research just to make sure I was remembering correctly, and soon discovered I was. I tried to change my mind. I really wanted this to work. But I couldn't do it. So I called Vanderbloemen, explained the situation, and told them I was no longer interested.

About three weeks later, after breaking up several more fights at the school where I worked, I decided I really was reformed. No, I felt I should continue to pursue this opportunity, because reformed is a label used within Christianity. And like many labels, it can mean many different things to different people. I thought, if I get a chance to come for an interview, I can find out what the people at Brick Church mean by it.

To make a long story short. I discovered that, more than anything, the word reformed is an integral part of this church's history. This church was birthed in the German Reformed tradition. The church constitution identifies three formal statements of faith as foundational to who we are, the Augsburg Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Luther Catechism. These embrace the three foundational tenants that emerged from within the Protestant Reformation.

(1) Scripture Alone – The belief that the Bible, as the divinely inspired Word of God, is the ultimate rule and authority for the Christian life

(2) Faith Alone – The belief that salvation comes through faith, not works or good deeds

(3) Grace Alone – The belief that salvation can only be received as an act of divine grace, and therefore is not earned

This is what I think you mean by that word reformed. This is something I can go along with. But I think all Christians should identify themselves as reformed in that sense of the word.

There is another label used to within Christianity, "Evangelical." The term comes from the Greek word *euangelion*, which is usually translated as the "gospel" or "good news," as in the good news of salvation that is available through Jesus Christ. Some Christians identify themselves not as plain old Christians but as "Evangelical Christians." What do they mean by that? I have no idea. It probably depends on what they think it means.

According to the National Association of Evangelicals, Evangelicals are people who “take the Bible seriously and believe in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.” They then go on to describe the four main convictions Evangelicals hold. They believe in...

- (1) The necessity of conversion – the need to experience a second birth, “born again”
- (2) The authority of the Bible and our need to follow what it teaches
- (3) Emphasizing the importance of Jesus’ death on the cross as far as our salvation is concerned
- (4) Being active in the world through evangelism (telling others about Christ) and speaking out on social issues

So if holding these convictions is what it means to be an Evangelical Christian, would you identify yourself that way?

I think of those four convictions, the one that most Christians would struggle to embrace is that last one, the activism part, particularly in terms of sharing our beliefs with others, telling others about Christ, or heaven forbid, appearing as if we are trying to impose our beliefs on others. Not only do we think it just isn’t polite or socially acceptable. It’s difficult, it’s hard, it’s scary.

Toward the end of this passage Jesus describes it as sending out sheep in the midst of wolves, where we are the sheep. He goes on to talk about the possibility of being arrested, thrown in prison, betrayed by those closest to you, hated by family and friends. This was a different time. It’s doubtful those things will happen to us (though I know a few people who have experienced those things) but it can cause friction within our relationships and possibly cause a few people to unfriend us on facebook, or make fun of us in the school cafeteria.

When I was in seminary I took a class called “Evangelism Through the Local Church.” It was not my favorite class. One of our assignments was to witness to a complete stranger. I’ll be honest. I did not want to do it. I kept putting it off and putting it off. But I was bound and determined to not let it be the reason I did not get an “A” in the class. I realize how bad that sounds, but it’s true.

I was working on my car one day in the parking lot of the complex where we lived. There was a couple visiting my next door neighbor. The husband kept walking back and forth to his car, loading it up with their luggage, as they were going to be leaving later that day. I just decided it was now or never. So I built up the courage, and waited until he walked by, and just laid into him. It turned out he was a Jehovah’s witness, and he had the very same plans for me. It was an interesting conversation to say the least.

As difficult as it is to tell others about Jesus, it is something all Christians should do. If you’re like me, maybe that sounds like bad news. But it’s true. In this passage Matthew refers to the disciples as apostles, a word which literally means “those who are sent out.” Anyone who claims to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, is also an apostle. So all of us are sent out by God to tell others about Christ.

But the good news is, approaching a complete stranger with a prepared script is only one of many ways to share the Gospel, and probably one of the least effective, one step above leaving a tract on a urinal in a public restroom. The point is, sharing our faith is something something we all should do. But where do we even begin?

It begins with recognizing the need. Matthew tells us that as Jesus went throughout the region of Judea ministering to the people, he had compassion on them because he saw they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. There is a world out there that is lost and hurting, not only miles away

from here, but just down the street. We would see that, if we would only open our eyes. It is so easy to get so caught up our own lives and our own problems that we become blind to the suffering that is all around us.

Beyond recognizing the need, we also need to recognize the sense of urgency. Jesus compared the crowds to a field that was ripe for harvest. You all understand the metaphor. When crops are ripe they will spoil if not harvested in time. There are literally people dying in our community who have not heard the truth of the Gospel. People who are slowly wasting away, suffering the consequences of their bad choices, facing difficult situations on their own. They need someone to tell them there is a better way to live, there is a God who loves them.

Our first reaction once we recognize both the need and the sense of urgency, is to pray for God to send someone to help them. That is a good first step. This is what Jesus instructed the disciples to do in the last verse of chapter 9. Then in the very first verse of chapter 10, Jesus made it clear that the disciples themselves were the answer to their prayers. You and me, we are the people God is sending to share the truth of the Gospel with our community. And so we go.

We go with compassion

When Jesus sent out the twelve disciples he gave them instructions to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers and cast out demons. And he promised to give them the ability to do those things, just as he had done them. It sounds like unrealistic expectations but you have to understand why Jesus performed these miracles. It wasn't to impress people. It was partly meant to point to his identity, but also to reveal God's love for people and to give them a glimpse of what was coming.

The disciples, and we, are guided by the same purpose. We go to people who are in need, who are hurting, who are struggling, who are in bondage to so many different things, and by the power of the Holy Spirit we meet those needs and we offer the healing, and wholeness and freedom that can only be found in Christ.

Evangelism, telling people about Jesus, must begin with compassion. You know the familiar saying, people don't care how much you know, until they know that you care.

We go in grace...

When the disciples were sent out they were told to expect nothing in return. When we go into our community to proclaim the truth of the Gospel, we go expecting nothing in return. When we take up a love offering for someone, or help someone pay a utility bill or a mortgage payment, or give them a gas card, we do so with no strings attached.

I can't tell you the number of times we have helped someone and their response has been to say something like, "Well I'm going to pay you back," or "I plan to come to a service some time." And I will say to them, "This is not a loan, and while we would love to have you to come to our church, that is not a condition of receiving this assistance. This is grace. And we extend grace, because we have received grace.

When we extend grace to someone we are proclaiming the Gospel, not in words, but in actions. And actions often speak louder than words. Our church is a generous church. But we could always be more so. We should always be on the lookout for ways we can extend grace to one another and to our

community. I have this crazy idea for how we could make a bold statement about God's grace, but I'm going to wait until I have been here a little longer before I suggest it.

We go dependent on God to be able to do what he has called us to do...

When the disciples were sent out they were told to take no money, no luggage, no change of clothes, no sandals or a staff, but were to be completely dependent on God to take care of them through the hospitality of others. It wasn't very practical advice. It was so impractical that some have suggested Jesus didn't mean it literally. He was simply trying to make the point that they should not try to act in their own strength, but rely upon God for strength.

Likewise, some of the things God will lay on our hearts to do, will seem so far beyond our own gifts and abilities. They are. We can't do these things on our own. If we are not being challenged by God there is a strong possibility, we are not listening to what he wants to say to us. When God sends us out we can't wait until we feel ready. We go, trusting that he will make us ready.

One of the consequences for the early believers who obeyed God's call was to wind up in court, on trial for their belief in Jesus. And Jesus' words to them were to not worry about what they were to say, but just trust him to provide the words. That sounds crazy. Sometimes trust looks crazy, but not if your trust is in God.

We Go in Wisdom

Jesus told the disciples to be wise as serpents but innocent as doves. Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference between radical trust and just a bad idea. In other words, it's possible to misunderstand God's leading in our lives. If someone is a recovering alcoholic and they feel God is calling them to share the Gospel in the local bar, there is a strong possibility that they are confused as to what God wants them to do. This is why we have each other, to bounce ideas off of each other. This is why we need to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We need to utilize our God-given wisdom as we seek to understand and discern what it is that God wants us to do.

We Go in Peace

Jesus told the disciples they should go in peace. And if they ever went somewhere where their message was not received, they should leave that place. We are not called to force the truth down someone's throat, or get up in their face and scream at them until they accept our point of view. We should not be judgmental, argumentative, coercive, or manipulative. We speak the truth in love. And pray that those who hear it will receive it.

You may want to identify yourself as an Evangelical Christian, because like the word Reformed, it comes with a lot of baggage. It's just a label, that means different things to different people. It doesn't really matter, but what does is whether or not there is an active dimension to your faith. We are all apostles. We are all sent out to share the good news of the Gospel with all who will listen, with our words, even more importantly, with our actions. We have been sent. Are we going?

In closing I want to bring us back to the beginning. Sharing the Gospel begins with recognizing the need. To do that we need to see the world, and our neighbors, as God sees us. If you would direct your attention to the screen.