

Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year A  
The Rev. George Arceneaux  
St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Milwaukee, Wisconsin  
May 14, 2023

Readings: Acts 17:22-31, 1 Peter 3:13-22, John 14:15-21

First, before anything, to whomever you are in whatever way it may be, Happy Mother's Day.

This morning, our first reading on Paul's trip to the Athenians at the Areopagus has me thinking about evangelization. Evangelization is a huge part of the Christian tradition. The word Gospel that we use every Sunday derives from euangulos—meaning, the good news—and has the same root for “to evangelize.” And yet, for many Episcopalians, including myself, evangelization is a pretty uncomfortable subject. I suspect that's because so many public pronouncements of faith have been used in pretty rotten ways. For many, evangelization means talking about an arrogant message from God that condemns people. For many, the idea of evangelizing is to say to another person, “I've got great news! Jesus is here to save you! Just don't be any other faith but Christian, believe what we believe, and do exactly as we say because that's what God wants.”

I confess that's pretty much what I thought evangelization was for a long time. I really thought that God wanted me to evangelize by convincing others of how right Christianity was and that, if I just presented enough evidence, I could make people believe. Like, in college I was sure I could convince my atheist best friend that Christianity had enough factual, historical basis for him to consider if only he'd read this one book written to convince others of Jesus' importance, “More than A Carpenter.” I bet you can guess how well that went. Of course, my friend thought it was about the stupidest, most trite book he had ever read, and he said that seemed less suited for actually converting someone to Christianity and more for reassuring Christians themselves. Over time, I've realized that is exactly why I wanted him to read the book. I wanted my own faith to be affirmed by this friend who didn't take Christianity for granted as I did, who had disavowed it because he'd experienced Christianity as pernicious and self-serving. I pulled this move with my friend because I needed to, not because God needed me to. I suspect that a great many evangelizations have been rooted less in God's hope for a just and loving world and more in the needs and insecurities of the faithful.

Evangelization has been used to hurt others. Nevertheless, Scripture tells us we need to spread the good news. But we don't need to evangelize as I did with my friend. We are called to evangelize as God and this broken world need.

About our world, Jesus says in our Gospel that it does not see or know the spirit of truth. It knows, just as I knew that my brand of Christianity was right and better than anyone else's belief, that the rich are better than the poor. That straight White men are better than everyone else. That people are bad if they struggle with addiction or are differently abled or that if you're old, you're useless to society, or that if you're young, you don't know enough to matter.

These sorts of cruel, innumerable injustices that we and those we love face are why God calls us to evangelize, to spread the good news that these are lies. That the truth is that justice matters and that everyone is purposed for fulfilling and meaningful lives of love. And we don't do this by handing out reading materials and trying to prove historical truths of Scripture, or by defending faith as a means of

addressing our own fragility or insecurity. We spread the good news by making it real. By, as 1 Peter puts it this morning, being eager to do good.

That guy I proselytized to in college is still my best friend. He has respect for Christianity not because of anything I've asked him to read but because of folks like you. Because every Thursday night before we play Dungeons and Dragons over the internet, he hears of St. Mark's work with Common Ground, or folks packing period supplies for the Milwaukee Diaper Mission over the summer, or invitations to church dinners not as a space of proselytization but as a good hang. The good news is manifest in the myriad of kindnesses you've offered to others, to one another and to me.

Each of us has the opportunity to spread the good news of God by loving our neighbor and being who we are. It's not always easy. When we push against a world that is happy with the way things are, we can run into push back and we can be hurt, sometimes enough that we can think the world can be any better or that we cannot help but accept the roles assigned to us.

The good news of God does not dismiss that hurt or say it doesn't exist. The good news says to the hurting and the alone in those spaces of darkness, in Mary Oliver's words, "Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine." The good news is that God doesn't merely talk about loving and helping people, and doesn't seek to verbally or rationally convince the world of uniform and doctrinal belief. The good news is indeed that God lived and died as one of us as Jesus, chose to be one of us. The good news is that you and everyone deserve love, are loved, and can love others. So let's spread the good news.