

15-Jan-2017 Sermon The “E Word”

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Today’s homily is on the “E Word.” Namely, Evangelism. The “E Word.” Right up there with Ebola, E-Coli and E-filing your income taxes. Not necessarily a word well-used in our tradition. For most of us, an evangelism experience could be summarized as one uncomfortable person uncomfortably relaying some sort of information about salvation—or *whatever*--to a second uncomfortable person in an awkward exchange both are very happy to have over. The experience rather bonds them together, like being stuck in an elevator with someone: “I’m glad *that’s* over with,” they say to one another happily when the machine starts moving again.

Other traditions are different. In the Southern Baptist church in which I was baptized in high school, there was an altar call every Sunday. “As the choir sings ‘Just as I am’—or perhaps ‘The Savior is Waiting,’ come forward to the altar to receive Jesus as your Lord and Savior.” And I asked my girlfriend at the time—who was the reason I *went to* that Baptist church--“What happens when the preacher knows that *everyone* in the congregation is already a Christian? Would there still be an altar call?” “Absolutely,” she answered. It’s a part of the Baptist tradition; and, frankly, it’s a sweet tradition. You come up and kneel down, and the preacher puts his arm around you and prays for you. I did it.

Andrew is one of John the Baptist’s disciples, and after John has introduced him to Jesus, Andrew spends an afternoon with Jesus. We don’t know what they talked about, but soon Andrew finds his brother Peter and tells him: “We have found the Messiah.” And that’s pretty much all there is to evangelism.

And of those five words, most of them are fairly self-explanatory. “We have found the Messiah.” The sticky word in that sentence is the word “Messiah.” You can tell that it was sticky even in the first century, because helpfully John adds, “which is translated ‘Anointed.’” But, sorry, John, that doesn’t really help us understand what “Messiah” means. We know it means Christ and we know that Christ means Anointed, but what do those words mean? So we’ll take some time in this homily to understand what Andrew meant by the word “Messiah,” and what it has to do with evangelism, and how Andrew *felt* when he said it.

Now the word “Messiah” has a very long and very rich history, dating back all the way to the books of Genesis and Numbers, through the rest of the Old Testament, developing in the books and the times between the Old and the New Testaments, and then really taking off in the New Testament among Christians, and in Judaism in the first five centuries after Christ. At different times and in different places, various nuances of the word Messiah are emphasized: sometimes it refers to a heavenly figure, sometimes to a military ruler, sometimes to an eschatological figure—that is, a figure at the end of time. Sometimes, as in the New Testament, those ideas are fused into one rich expectation. As I said, throughout the history of the term, various nuances are emphasized more

than others. But there's one consistent theme: that Messiah means Coming King. Coming King. And not just any king, but the King of Kings. The Preeminent King.

So when Andrew tells Peter, "We have found the Messiah," he means, "We have found the King." That's the message at the core of evangelism: that we have found the king.

And that introduces another problem—we Americans made a conscious choice at the Constitutional Convention in 1787 to have a president rather than a king. So the phrase "We have found the King" doesn't resonate with us in exactly the same way that it might to someone who lives in a monarchy, or, as in the case of Palestine in the first century, someone who is looking forward to living in a monarchy. So please indulge me for the rest of the homily and pretend that you live in a country that is under oppression but is looking forward to the coming of a king to be its leader. Because if we were to translate Andrew's saying as, "We have found the president," it just doesn't have the same feeling.

"We have found the king." So the key question is—the key question that God in His Bible full of questions aimed at us, is—why does Andrew say this to Peter? Why does Andrew do evangelism?

The reason we don't usually "do" evangelism in our tradition may be simple. Painful, but simple. We don't really believe that *what* we believe is *good news*. We don't really believe that *what* we believe is good news. If we thought it was good news, we would share it. Because it's the nature of good news that people *want* to share it. "Good news—I'm going to be grandfather." "Good news—I don't have that disease they tested me for." "Good news—I just got a job." And perhaps the best news of all—"Good news—my *son* or *daughter* just got a job." When we get good news, we want to share it. It's *bursting* inside us. "Hey everybody, good news!"

And people want to *hear* it. When you've said, "Hey, do you want to hear some good news," have you ever heard them say, "Nah.... I'm good. No good news for me." No. People *want* to hear good news. Good news *breaks in* from outside and the breaking in is part of the pleasure of good news.

I remember when my first son was born—boy was I proud—and I announced to my professor in my Systematic Theology I class that, "I'm sorry that I missed your last lecture—I was at the birth of my son!" And the instructor replied in his refined British accent, "Well, we're not going to let *that* stop us, are we?"

It wasn't *quite* the reception I had expected. But after the class everyone congratulated me. Because it was good news.

Frankly, it's easy to get to the place in life where it's easy to forget that what we believe about Jesus and what we believe about God and what we believe about salvation *is* good news. Because we learn skepticism. We learn skepticism because life can feel like a cock fight, that you're the rooster and you're in the ring up against some other rooster—maybe it's your spouse, or your child, or your neighbor—or maybe the other rooster is your loneliness or your depression or your illness—or maybe the other rooster is just the fact that there are a lot of problems in this world that we can't seem to do a thing about. And you and the other rooster both have razor blades

strapped to your feet and you look down and you realize this is a fight to the finish, and there are lots of people around the ring hollering and betting money but the thing is, the roosters never see any of that money. Or maybe there are two other roosters in the ring going at it, and each of them is looking at you saying, “Hey, get in here and help me.”

Or maybe it’s just you and Death in the ring and you look down at his feet and you see those razor blades and you look down at your feet and there aren’t any razor blades and you realize this isn’t a fair fight.

We learn skepticism for good reasons. And we learn skepticism early.

But the king, the monarch, can bring an antidote to skepticism. The monarch can break into our workaday lives with good news of *their* lives, with all the kingdom and the power and the glory of the world of a monarch. Only the monarch can bring that good news.

The best way to illustrate this is through a story. A young girl writes to her newspaper editor: “Dear editor: I am 8 years old. Some of my little friends say there is no Santa Claus. Papa says, ‘If you see it in The Sun [the name of the newspaper] it’s so.’ Please tell me the truth; is there a Santa Claus?” Virginia O’Hanlon, 115 West Ninety-Fifth Street in New York City.

And the editor writes back, “Virginia, your little friends are wrong. They have been affected by the skepticism of a skeptical age.” You see, Virginia’s friends have learned for good reason that life can be like a cock fight, and that in that ring you’d better learn to rely on your own wits because, frankly, there’s no one that’s going to break into that ring to help you.

The editor continues: “[Your friends] do not believe except they see. They think that nothing can be which is not comprehensible by their little minds.” Now that’s what we’re used to reading and thinking—that’s it’s us versus them, that it’s us who are open minded and big minded and liberal minded against those other roosters with the little minds. So far, so good, Mr. Editor.

Now the editor of the Sun was a man whose first name was Francis and whose last name was, ironically, Church. But when Mr. Church continues, he goes off in a different direction: “All minds, Virginia, whether they be men’s or children’s, are little. In this great universe of ours man is a mere insect, an ant, in his intellect, as compared with the boundless world about him, as measured by the intelligence capable of grasping the whole of truth and knowledge.”

“Humans as insects”—too bad that Francis Church couldn’t predict the smart phone. That for only \$40 per month any of us can have access to virtually all human knowledge?

Church goes on. “Yes, VIRGINIA, there is a Santa Claus. He exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist, and you know that they abound and give to your life its highest beauty and joy.” Now he’s back on a familiar theme. Of course there’s no Santa Claus, but there’s the *Spirit* of Christmas, just like the Spirit of Love that we Christians want to bring to the world, right? Isn’t the spirit of love the good news?

Church continues. "Alas! how dreary would be the world if there were no Santa Claus. It would be as dreary as if there were no VIRGINIAS. There would be no childlike faith then, no poetry, no romance to make tolerable this existence.... Nobody sees Santa Claus, but that is no sign that there is no Santa Claus. The most real things in the world are those that neither children nor men can see.... Nobody can conceive or imagine all the wonders there are unseen and unseeable in the world. You may tear apart the baby's rattle and see what makes the noise inside, but there is a veil covering the unseen world which not the strongest man, nor even the united strength of all the strongest men that ever lived, could tear apart."

When you think about it, the editorial is not really about Santa Claus. I can guarantee Virginia O'Hanlon didn't believe in Santa Claus when she was thirty years old. The editorial is about Church bringing *good news* to Virginia, namely, that it's *okay* to *believe* in good news; it's okay to believe in things that are greater than yourself; it's okay to believe in things that are unseen because there are wonders out there ready to break into our world. The editorial is fundamentally about good news, which children inherently understand better than adults do because we've learned skepticism. As I said before, we've learned skepticism for good reasons.

Except, Mr. Church, we'll correct your editorial a bit. You write that a veil covers the unseen world which not the strongest man, nor even the united strength of all the strongest men that ever lived, could tear apart. But someone has torn apart that veil. Messiah would come to teach us about the unseen God and to love us to God and when Andrew says, "We have found the Messiah," he meant, in part, that the veil over the unseen world and over God would be lifted. And that is good news.

All of this is difficult for us to buy into because we are so wise about this age. And I don't think God blames us for being cynical. After the resurrection, Thomas is cynical.

So let's go back to the life of Virginia O'Hanlon from 115 West Ninety-Fifth Street. The famous editorial changed her life. Because good news has the power to change lives. Good news has the power to change lives.

She did not come from wealth; her father was an assistant in a funeral home. Even so, she graduated from Hunter College, got a master's degree in education from Columbia University, and then a doctorate from Fordham University in 1930. The title of her dissertation was "The Importance of Play." In New York City she was first a school teacher and then a principal; her career in education lasted 47 years. She died in 1971.

Even so, she had times when she knew that life is like a cock fight. You see, she was married briefly, but her husband deserted her just before the birth of their child. Never came back. And that's one of the lowest things a woman can have happen to her. She, like us, had every right to be cynical. But she didn't make use of that right.

"We have found the Messiah." Or use your own words. Talk about the adventure that the Christian life is, because Jesus says that He came to bring us life, and to bring it abundantly. Talk

about the family spirit here at Christ Episcopal. Talk about whatever you want, and you will find that it is good news. And good news changes lives.