

Why I love the Church: we have good news to share

Message for Sunday, January 27, 2019
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Luke 5:27-32 and others

Children's Message:

Mark 1:32-33, New International Version:
That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door.

QUESTIONS:

- How did people know that Jesus could heal people? Because someone saw Jesus do that, and told everyone they met the good news.
- How did people know that Jesus was in town that day? Because someone saw him there, and spread the good news.

It's a wonderful thing to be a messenger with good news! With that in mind, I invite the young people to come up for our time together.

Our home here in Stirling is close to a marsh. Do you know what a marsh is? It's like a pond, but the water is very shallow. Cattails grow in the water, and they grow so thick that you can't see the water. You might think you could walk across it, like going through the woods. But after the first step, you'd realize it was wet.

Anyway, in the summer, there are hundreds of birds living in the marsh. In the evening they are chirping or singing—making the noises that birds makes. But multiply that by five or six hundred, and that's a lot of noise! When we have guests staying with us, I love to take them over to the marsh so they can hear for themselves. It's really amazing.

When I see something or hear something that is really amazing, I just want to tell other people about it! If there's a beautiful sunset, I call to Jane to come and watch it with me.

The good news of Jesus is one of those amazing wonderful things. I've done some stupid things, some bad things—but Jesus still loves me. That's good news! The more I read in the Bible about

Jesus, the more excited I become about him, and want to tell others.

You can tell others, too. Jesus loves you, even though you've also done bad things. That's good news! Jesus loves your friends, too, but maybe they don't know that. You can tell them. You can be someone with good news!

Message “Why I love the Church: we have good news to share”

The invisible church

When we lived in Prince Edward County, we lived on a country road. One day in the fall our family was going somewhere, and as we drove along, we noticed a small tree with reddish leaves that were odd. They were round in shape, instead of the usual point at the end, and then it hit me—those aren't leaves; those are apples! We stopped the car and went back for a closer look, and sure enough, it was an apple tree.

I had driven that road hundreds of times, and I had never noticed an apple tree. “Where there's one, there are likely more,” I thought. So we made a point of looking for more while we drove. In the end, we found *twenty-six* apple trees along the side of that road!

The apple trees had been there all along. And once I was interested enough in apple trees to look for them, they were easy to spot. We even stopped the car in a few places to get out and try a few.

Maybe that's the story of our church. We have a nice building, and it's on a busy street. A few hundred people drive or walk by it every day. But they've never stopped at our church, much less come inside to try it out. They don't know what we do here, and they probably don't care. It's like the church is invisible.

This is sad. The Church has good news—great, *wonderful* news—that God loves you, just as you are. People would love to know that. God has placed us here for the purpose of sharing, and living, the good news. How do we do that?

1) Step 1: Building Bridges

In Biblical times, the Jewish religion placed great value on building social walls. Jews did not associate with Gentiles; men stayed away from

women other than their wives; the “righteous” avoided contact with “sinners;” the healthy kept clear of lepers and other diseased persons.

Jesus angered many people, and delighted others by his practice of breaking down those walls and instead building bridges. Levi (also known as Matthew), was one of those despised tax collectors, a traitor to the nation, working for the Romans. People hated them also because they cheated, charging people more than they owed, and pocketing the difference. The Roman soldiers would deal with anyone who complained. But Jesus, instead of shunning Levi, built a bridge to him:

Luke 5:27-32, New Living Translation (over the next few verses)
Jesus saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at his tax collection booth. “Come, be my disciple!” Jesus said to him.

Levi’s response to this invitation?

So Levi got up, left everything, and followed him.

Don’t get the idea that Levi just followed Jesus down the street. He left behind his old corrupt life entirely, and followed Jesus into a new life of discipleship. It was the beginning of a lifetime of following.

Levi wanted his friends to meet this Jesus who built a bridge into his world, so he prepared a banquet for a large crowd of his fellow tax collectors. To put this in modern terms, it would be like the Pope attending a convention of the Sicilian Mafia. That explains why the super-religious wall-builders of the day (the Pharisees) complained:

Soon Levi held a banquet in his home with Jesus as the guest of honour. Many of Levi’s fellow tax collectors and other guests were there. But the Pharisees and their teachers of the religious law complained bitterly to Jesus’ disciples, “Why do you eat and drink with such scum?”

Jesus was ready with an answer:

“Healthy people don’t need a doctor—sick people do. I have come to call sinners to turn from their sins, not to spend my time with those who think they are already good enough.”

Was it at Levi’s dinner that the man Jesus told about in Luke 18 began his spiritual journey?

Luke 18:13, New Living Translation:
But the tax collector stood at a distance and dared not even lift his eyes to heaven as he prayed. Instead, he beat his chest in sorrow, saying, “O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner.”

The result was that tax collectors considered Jesus a friend and began to listen to what he had to say.

Luke 15:1, New Living Translation:
Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach.

Banquets continue to be common bridge builders, where the church reaches out to the community—although I’m thinking of dinners where the focus is not on fund-raising, but on friend-raising. That’s what we do here when we have our pot-luck supper and game nights.

2) Step 2: From building bridges to doing ministry

Jesus did more than just be pals with tax collectors. He also went from village to village preaching the “Good News” and healing people. The coming of Jesus was the hottest event in town:

Mark 1:32-33, New Living Translation:
Many sick and demon-possessed people were brought to Jesus. And a huge crowd of people from all over Capernaum gathered outside the door to watch. So Jesus healed great numbers of sick people who had many different kinds of diseases.

There is no shortage of needs in our community. Wouldn’t it be great if the churches caught the attention of the community the way that Jesus did?

That’s exactly what the Nazarene Church in Bethany, Oklahoma did. They had been studying what Jesus says about loving your neighbours, and learning how Jesus himself did it. On Easter Sunday, the leaders asked the people of the congregation to identify the needs of the community. They took all the suggestions and compiled them into 13 areas. The next Sunday, that list of 13 was published in their bulletin, along with the announcement: “Look over the list of ministry groups, and find the one that excites you. Go to the room for that group at 5 p.m. tonight.” There were

such things as adult literacy, Meals on Wheels, counselling for people with addictions and their families, and ministries to the hungry, the homeless, and those in prison.

Rather than getting permission for doing things from boards and committees, the groups were simply turned loose to follow God's calling. The minister would help where able, but it was the people who planned and carried out these ministries, according to their own vision. It was not assumed that all these outreaches would prosper. People had permission to succeed or fail. Church members began to dream new dreams, and new life blossomed in that church.

The pastor of Lawndale Community Church in Chicago was wondering how they could reach out to people in the neighbourhood. He imagined big projects like low income housing, a recreation centre, or a health clinic. But as he listened to people, he heard them saying that their greatest need was a safe place to do their laundry! So the church installed washers and dryers, and opened a laundromat. People flocked to that church, and they liked what they found.

In those two examples, the churches touches the lives of many people. But remember: it's because they focussed on what others needed, *not* what the church needed.

You can do ministry on your own. You don't have to be part of a committee. Peter was going to worship one day when he a lame man stopped him, begging for money.

Acts 3:6, New Living Translation:

Peter said, "I don't have any money for you. But I'll give you what I have. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, get up and walk!"

Note one key about Peter's ministry: he made it clear why he was doing this: it was in the name of Jesus. Sharing God's love naturally leads to sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. That's the next step.

3) Step 3: From ministry to gospel

If the church concentrates on being friendly and helping people, and that's as far as it goes, then we're no different from the Lions Club or the Legion. There's nothing wrong with service clubs

and social work. It's just that the Church has a different mission.

When John the Baptist was in prison, he sent some friends to Jesus to ask whether he really was the Messiah. Listen to how Jesus describes his ministry:

Luke 7:22, New International Version:

So Jesus replied to the messengers, "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, *and the good news is preached to the poor.*" [my italics]

Jesus would still be the Great Physician if he had left out the Gospel, but he would not be the Saviour.

The church that is building bridges, ministering to people, and sharing the power of God in people's lives is fulfilling its calling. This is why I love the Church: when we follow Jesus' plan, we are living out our purpose. This is what we were made for.

Next Steps:

- Pray for a heart that loves others like Jesus did. Let his Spirit fill your heart.
- Build a bridge: connect with one or more people who are not part of any church, especially those who feel they're not welcome in the church. Enjoy one another.
- Do ministry: love and serve others. Look for ways to help.
- Share the good news of Jesus, who loves, forgives, heals, restores, and challenges.