

You Are An Evangelist Too...

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These days I am an evangelist. My life, whether at church or in the community is devoted to evangelizing – to reconciling those whom I encounter to God.

What does that mean, you might ask. Perhaps you are shocked. Clelia, the Episcopal deacon, an evangelist? Clelia is evangelizing? Do we do that in the Episcopal Church? I thought evangelism was something those "other" churches did. Surely, not us – surely, not us Episcopalians.

But, I am an evangelist – I really am – and whether or not you know it, you are too.

So, let's take it apart – let's unpack it.

First of all what does it mean to reconcile people to God? Various synonyms for reconcile are: to reunite, to bring together, to restore to harmony. When we are doing the work of reconciling people to God, we are working to unite, or to reunite, them with God. We are working to bring them together with God. We are working to restore harmony in their relationship with God – to bring about their awareness of God's love for them, and the healing power of that love. A love filled with grace and forgiveness.

And then, what does that controversial word evangelize really mean? To evangelize means above all to bear witness to a transformation that occurs within ourselves once we allow Christ to abide in us and we in him.

Once Jesus has become the source of our life, we are called to give the gift of the life-giving Jesus to the world. Through us the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, takes on bodily, truthful expression. Through our relationship with Christ, we develop a way of being in the world that helps people come to the awareness that there is another way of being – a way not centered on preoccupation with self, a way that is not divisive, angry, violent and filled with hatred. Another way – a way that heals mind, body and spirit. A way that brings us together in love – the kind of love, the *agape* love, that Jesus had for us – the kind of love that God has for us.

To evangelize does not mean standing on a corner with a bible in your hand and talking about Jesus to someone. Absolutely not. Evangelism is a *way of being* in the world – a way that brings the "other" to the awareness of the value he or she has in God's eyes – to the awareness that they are loved by God. Evangelizing means communicating through your very being the words that God proclaimed five centuries before Christ: "*You are precious in my sight, and I love you*" (Isaiah 43:4).

Evangelism and its outcome of inspiring people to realize their worth in God's eyes – the love that God has for them and the forgiveness, the salvation that comes along with that love - is not something optional. Paul put it quite succinctly when he said, "*Woe to me if I do not evangelize!*" (1 Corinthians 9:16)

For Paul, evangelization was the direct consequence of his commitment to Christ. As Paul understood it, through his presence among us – his incarnation and then his resurrection - Christ united us inseparably to God. Through our relationship with Jesus we are united with the divine – the flesh and the spirit become one.

No one should ever feel they are excluded from that union – excluded from the knowledge that they are a loved child of God.

Evangelization calls us to start with ourselves. It is first and foremost a way of life, a way of being in the world that occurs as our result of our "oneness" with Jesus Christ. A way of life through which that "oneness" transforms us into witnesses of the reality of God's love. Once Christ abides in us and we in him, evangelization occurs unconsciously, effortlessly, through our joy in knowing that God has always loved us and will always love us and through the peace that comes from knowing that God is with us always.

Through our being one with God, Christ becomes both visible and credible in the eyes of those who do not know him. We become evangelists.

In the Gospel of John Jesus says, "*I am the bread of life that came down from heaven... Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.*" (John 6:51-58)

How, you may be wondering, do we as members of the Episcopal Church link evangelism to Jesus' claim that he is the bread of life, and to our regular participation in the Eucharist. What does our gathering around God's table each Sunday really mean to us and for us. How does the eucharist transform us. Who do we become once the celebrant has proclaimed, "*The Gifts of God for the People of God*", and as we then receive the sacraments of bread and wine, as we participate in the gift of Jesus with us, among us, in us

Without question our participation in the Eucharist draws us into intimate relationship with Jesus. The flesh and the spirit are joined. Through our participation in the eucharist, we experience the union of the human and the divine. We abide with Jesus and he abides with us. And, in receiving the life-giving gift of Jesus, we accept his love – we accept God's love for the world.

We become a people transformed. A people ready to go out into the world and to witness another way of being – a way of love, a way of forgiveness, a way that allows hope, a way that promotes healing, a way that gives joy, a way that brings the peace that passes all understanding. We become evangelists.

All of this reminds me of Roy, an African-American man, who died many years ago of AIDS. When I first met Roy I was working for an organization called AIDS-Related Community Services, better known as ARCS. ARCS was located just outside of New York City and was one of the first organizations to offer counseling and other services for people living with HIV/AIDS.

The year was 1990. As you may recall, in 1990 people living with HIV/AIDS were seen as modern day lepers. No one wanted anything to do with them. We at ARCS could not identify one doctor or one dentist in all of Westchester County who would allow any of our clients in their offices.

In order to meet the medical needs of a growing number of men and women who were dying without care and alone, the local hospital rented a house and converted it into a hospice for people living with AIDS. It was their goal to give each and every person as much dignity as possible and to keep them active for as long as their disease permitted.

Enter Roy who was assigned to ARCS as a volunteer. Roy looked much older than 32. He had lived a hard life. Roy told us that he had been on the streets since the age of seven. He had become addicted to drugs in his early teens. He had contracted AIDS through sharing dirty needles while injecting Heroin. Clean and sober now, AIDS had taken a huge toll on Roy. His body and feet were covered in lesions that occur as a result of AIDS-related Kaposi's Sarcoma.

Clearly Roy was continually in pain, but he was persistent in his efforts to be of use wherever and whenever possible. His favorite task was Xeroxing – he continually marveled at the ins and outs of our Xerox machine and its capabilities."

We all came to love Roy. Our office was large and staff numbered about 35. Roy knew each and every one of us, and we him.

On what was to be his last day with us, Roy sat down in my office and said, "You know, I never had a family before. But, now I do. You are my family, and it feels good.."

The next day Roy was admitted to the hospital. He died three days later.

The funeral, held several days later in the equivalent of a Potter's Field, was attended by over ten of the ARCS staff.

The ARCS' staff, while not a religious group, was a group of people filled with love and compassion. We were all, every single one of us, intent on witnessing the love and respect that we had for each of our many clients. Many of us sat with them for hours as they died, slowly and painfully, and alone.

Our journey with Roy, and so many others, represents to me the epitome of evangelism. The epitome of inspiring people to realize their worth in God's eyes – the love that God has for them and the forgiveness, and the salvation that comes along with that love. I will never

forget Roy and the gift that he gave us as he allowed us to love him. We were in Roy and he was in us. The gift of God's love brought us together in peace, in joy, and a better way to walk beside those individuals living with HIV/AIDS.

In 1 Thessalonians Paul says, *"So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us."* (1 Thessalonians 2:8)

"You have become very dear to us."

That is the essence of evangelism – the evangelism that you and I are in the business of carrying out as we leave our various churches each week. We are called to share not only the gospel of God, but also ourselves, because the world has become very dear to us. Because we want to give witness to the reality that there is another way of being. A way of being that is not based in divisiveness, anger, violence, and hatred. A way of being that is based in compassion, in forgiveness, in love.

We are showing the world that there is another way of being, and if we shine the light of that way so very brightly, those living in darkness will want to join us. We will have fed them the Bread of Life. We will have fulfilled our call as evangelists.