

Introduction

I wonder what comes to mind if I say the word: evangelism. Does the very word fill you with eager anticipation? Are you delighted to learn more about evangelism because you love to talk to your friends, neighbours, strangers about your Christian faith? Or does the knowledge that I'm talking about evangelism this morning make you wish you'd stayed home?

Probably you sit somewhere in the middle of those two extremes...

Somewhere between experiencing a deep sense of joy, excitement and passion at the idea of sharing your faith, and resisting (or succumbing to) the temptation to slump lower in your seat to help you avoid eye contact with the crazy-woman at the front.

Perhaps you're not sure what the word evangelism means; or you're not even sure that you believe in God...

Whichever of those three sounds most like you, I'm really glad that you're here. And I'm confident that we can learn some stuff together.

But who am I? Most of you don't know me. A little bit about me:

Christian home; small church community that was Lively; Community focused – inward and outward; Intergenerational emphasis.

Made a decision to embrace Christian faith, and experienced camps and other events that helped cement that decision for me, and taught me how to nurture my faith.

I've always been keen to share that faith with others, but in ways that are gentle, appropriate and not too weird.

Roxburgh: Apricots; Harry and Olga; Steve

After we were married, planted Graceway

Two daughters – now 18 and 21

(Summer in Dunedin 2002/03 while we lived in Auckland)

Returned to Christchurch and pastored Opawa Baptist

Moved to Adelaide – and struggled to find a place to use all of my gifts: bits of me were a little lost.

Started a PhD. Perfectly normal response?

Eventually, we decided it was time to come home to Aotearoa and Steve was offered a job here in Dunedin.

I finished my PhD, started working as one of the leaders of a Presbyterian student congregation here in Dunedin, and at the beginning of this year (also) became Somerville Lecturer in Pastoral Theology at Otago University.

Pastoral ministry and teaching/research combo.

And here I am: Roly and Julian invited me to preach and lead a workshop this afternoon. Primarily because of my PhD: because it is interesting and potentially useful for the Church. Explored why previously unchurched people were becoming Christians. I'll talk more about the process and the findings this afternoon, but this morning I want to tell you some things I learned from the people I interviewed; draw some links to scripture; and suggest some implications for you, for me, and for Caversham Baptist.

Upside down evangelism

In order to do this, I'm going to tell some stories from people who recently became Christians; and tell some stories from the Bible.

And in doing so, I'm going to let you into a secret: some of the best contemporary evangelism is upside down.

But first, let's think for a moment about what evangelism is...

What is evangelism?

Brainstorm...

Google tells me it is "The spreading of the Christian gospel by public preaching or personal witness."

Greek roots of the word (New Testament) relate to bringing the gospel – or good news – to people. We've tended to think of that in terms of proclamation: telling people stuff. But that is not all that evangelism can be: especially upside down evangelism!

Stories

With those ideas about evangelism in mind, let me tell you about a woman that I interviewed and her friend.

I'll call one of them Liz and one of them Jean. At the time of events surrounding this story, one was a Christian and one was not.

Here's how the story goes:

Liz's father was unwell. He had cancer and was going through chemotherapy. Liz was sad. One day, Liz said to her friend Jean: can you please pray for my father with me? Jean prayed with Liz for Liz's father. Liz's father got a bit better. Liz was comforted by the prayer. Jean was glad.

You might think that is an unremarkable story. It's great that Liz asked Jean to pray for her, right? Maybe you wonder how Jean had acted that made Liz know that it was safe to ask her to pray. Maybe you are a little surprised that Jean didn't offer to pray before Liz asked her to.

But there's a reason for that! The really interesting thing about this story is the role the Christian and the non-Christian played in it.

Who assumed that Jean was the Christian in this story? Liz asked Jean to pray with her: presumably Jean was a Christian. I told you that only one of them was a Christian at the time of the story: it's pretty logical to assume it was Jean, right?

Wrong!

Jean was not a Christian. Liz was. Liz, the Christian, asked her non-Christian friend Jean to pray with her. That is an example of what I'm calling upside down evangelism.

Let me tell you the story again, using the words Jean used to tell it to me:

One of my really, really good friends [she was a Christian] and... her father was going through chemotherapy and cancer and she would often say, "Please just ... come and pray with me." And I would kind of think, "What can I... how is that going to make a difference because I am not religious" and I didn't understand it. But she just felt so comforted by it that I would just sit there and pray with her. And you know he's not in perfect health, but like, it was just such a, it was the first time I really thought, "Wow this can make a difference as well." He's just defied so many odds and you know knowing that he has had so many people praying for him is a big part of their lives. So yeah, that just kind of got me thinking as to maybe this prayer stuff is real.

Jean's story is one of the reasons why I say that some of the best contemporary evangelism is upside down. In this instance, it wasn't about Liz sharing words about her faith: it was about Liz being vulnerable with her non-Christian friend and asking her for help and support.

Liz was seeking help, and Jean provided gentle care and support. This experience marked a key point on Jean's own journey towards embracing Christianity for herself. It made her recognise that prayer could make a difference – that "maybe this prayer stuff is real." Jean may never have realised that, if her friend Liz had not asked her to pray for her.

Now let me hasten to say that that was not ALL that Liz did that helped Jean on her journey towards Christian faith. There are other stories I could tell you of Liz's interactions with Jean: some (but not all) of them examples of more "normal" evangelism. But this upside-down one was a hugely significant part of Jean's journey to faith.

But maybe Jean's story is just weird. Really unusual.

Except it's not.

Let me tell you about Olivia and her friend Hannah. At the time of this story, Hannah was a Christian and her friend Olivia barely knew what a Christian was. Olivia told me this story.

Hannah – the Christian - experienced a family tragedy that she talked about with Olivia after Olivia had offered her condolences. Olivia says:

That was kind of how I got to know her. ... We talked a lot about [the tragedy] and how Hannah saw God's role in her life and in [the tragedy]. ... And you know, obviously it wasn't so much at that stage like she was trying to evangelise or anything, like she was just literally telling me like how it was for her and how she viewed her relationship with God So I felt like it really ... made a big impact on me. To be able to talk to her and just, I dunno, I guess see where her head was at. And I was just really listening, mostly.

Olivia – the non-Christian – was helping her Christian friend, by listening. Hannah wasn't seeking to evangelise. She was simply sharing her story, her pain. The openness that deep sharing created, was a catalyst for Olivia's long process of being drawn into a relationship with God.

Those two stories, and others I could tell, point to the importance of what I'm calling upside-down evangelism.

Rather than Christians helping non-Christians: imparting their knowledge to their non-Christian friends, Christians – Jean and Hannah – were inviting their non-Christian friends to help and support them.

Because they had friends who weren't Christians. Because they were open to being vulnerable with them. Because they were real, open and honest.

That seemed pretty upside down to me. A little unexpected. But rather wonderful, when you think about it.

I'm aware that these sorts of ideas don't generally make it into the evangelism books and training programmes.

But these ideas did make it into the Bible. There are many examples in the gospels where Jesus acted not as a host but as a guest. He was invited places. He invited himself places. He placed himself in situations where he needed others to care for him. And not just Jesus, in Luke 10, Jesus sent 72 disciples out, without sandals, purse or bag. Those disciples were also vulnerable and reliant on others; dependent upon the hosts who welcomed them in. There was an upside down ness to the evangelism that they engaged in.

Samaritan woman

I want us to consider one particular story from the Bible today. from John 4.

It is a text that you are likely to be familiar with, and I understand that you explored it together last year. It is the story of Jesus and the woman he met at a well in a Samaritan city. A Samaritan woman.

John 4:3-30;39-42

There are some unusual things in this story. Some things that surprised the disciples. Some things that would have made the initial hearers draw breath, or purse their lips in a disapproving sort of way, or frown slightly as they listened... Maybe there are some upside-down things

First up, notice that it's noon. That's significant. It's not normal, "go collect water" time. It's "rest under a shady tree" time.

You can understand Jesus being there, he was travelling, and thirsty. But the Samaritan woman? What was she doing at the well at midday? Many commentators reckon that she was ostracised by her community, and therefore she skulked around to the well when no one else was there. And yet, later in the story, she is a person of influence, inviting others to

come and meet Jesus: surprising if she was indeed ostracised. So, basically, we don't really know why she was there. But she probably had an immediate need of the water, or she would have gone later in the day. This makes it even more surprising that she raced off without her water jug – having made the effort to brave the midday sun and collect water, the Samaritan woman left without either water or jug. This experience – this encounter that she had with Jesus – was clearly extraordinary.

Also, Samaritan woman? There are two strikes against her in 1st century Judea. 1. She was Samaritan. 2. She was a woman. Both these labels represented good reasons to be ignored. Samaritans and Jews did not get along (to put it mildly! There is a political backstory dating back centuries that caused division and rejection). Many of you will be very familiar with the story of the Good Samaritan from the Gospel of Luke: In that story, Jesus challenged Jewish thinking by having a Samaritan acting as the good guy, in contrast to the Jewish leaders who apparently missed the opportunity to serve. In this story from John 4, Jesus took time to speak with a Samaritan. And not just to speak with her, but to ask her for help. A woman. A Samaritan woman. He was vulnerable with her. He respected her. Interestingly, he revealed more to her about himself than he was prepared to tell many others: he wasn't in the habit of claiming to be the Christ. And yet that is what he said to her, "I am he."

Jesus broke down the barrier between himself as a Jew and her as a Samaritan. And the barrier between him as a man and her as a woman. He saw her as a person, not just as a labelled "thing". The disciples missed that: they were just surprised to see him talking with a woman.

The Samaritan woman recognised that Jesus saw, knew and valued her. So, Jesus was vulnerable with this woman: like Hannah and like Liz, he asked for help. He allowed someone else to minister to her, and that ministry resulted in his physical need being met, and her holistic wellbeing to be restored. I reckon that Jesus' interaction with her was a little upside-down.

It reminds us of the importance of being vulnerable with one another. Of asking for help.

What can we learn?

What can we learn from these stories: of Jean and Liz; of Olivia and Hannah; of Jesus and an unnamed Samaritan woman. What do they help us to understand about upside down evangelism and why it is important?

First, upside-down evangelism is important because of who we are: human beings are created for healthy relationships. Relationships with God and relationships with other humans.

We can devalue relationships when we value independence over interdependence. Our non-western brothers and sisters give us a better sense of this: that we are who we are in relationship with others. I set myself in the context of relationships this morning. Because I am who I am in relation to others.

Neuroscience is catching up, and theology can return us to Hebrew understandings of the importance of relationships to our very beings.

The stories I have told: of Jean and Liz; of Olivia and Hannah; of Jesus and the Samaritan woman demonstrate that an important part of those relationships is vulnerability. Being open with one another. Allowing people into our lives, including into our struggles. The best relationships are mutual and reciprocal: they go two ways. Of course, I'm not saying to go tell everyone all your problems: but I am encouraging you to foster relationships that are mutual – two way. Where you help others and are also open to them helping you. Where you enjoy others and they enjoy you. Where you strengthen and are strengthened by others. Where you recognise that we are who we are – I am who I am – you are who you are – in relationship with others. And, you can include non-Christians among those friends who help you to be and to become the person God has created you to be.

Secondly, upside down evangelism keeps us humble and real. It reminds us we don't have all the answers and that is OK. Life doesn't suddenly become perfect when you become a Christian. There continues to be illness and death and pain and suffering. Yes, we have a hope that transcends those things, but they are often still our companions, our reality, in our everyday life. Our relationship with God helps hold and sustain us during these challenging times. Which Liz demonstrated when she asked her friend to pray with her.

Interestingly, the people I interviewed, who had come to faith having had no church background, appreciated the fact that their Christian friends had space for doubts and acknowledged the complexities of our faith. We do our very best to understand and explain, but our little brains cannot comprehend all that God is. When we pretend everything is sweet, or that everything can be explained away, or that we know all there is to know, we can do God and God's mystery and wonder a disservice.

If Jesus hadn't been needy, hadn't been thirsty, and hadn't been prepared to name and acknowledge that thirst, he wouldn't have met the Samaritan woman. Out of his human need came a remarkable conversation that drew the woman and others from her village to recognise Jesus was the Messiah.

A caution

There's an important caution that we need to note here. We don't do this stuff AS a deliberate form of evangelism. We do it because it's what we do, and it is who we are. One writer contrasts genuine relationality, where relationship is the goal, with what he calls relationalistic practices: where we form relationships (or perhaps are vulnerable with our neighbours) because we have a goal of getting them to come to church or to become Christians. That is NOT what I am talking about here.

What does it mean for you as people and you as a church?

Don't be afraid of evangelism. And don't be afraid to have it upside down from time to time. Be vulnerable with your friends, because they are your friends and you value them and

enjoy them. Share stuff and let them help you. Seeing people as people. Being vulnerable, open and honest.

At the same time, remember that upside down evangelism isn't all we need to do: it's not the end of it. But it is part of it. If you'd like to know more about what else is part of it, you really should come this afternoon...

If you arrived really enthusiastic about evangelism, I hope that you leave encouraged to keep at it, and also to look for opportunities to deepen relationships with people, because you genuinely enjoy them.

If you were pretty uneasy about the E word, I hope that I've encouraged you that evangelism can be as easy as being open and vulnerable with your friends. Talking about what your Christian faith means to you, in good times and in hard times, even if (or rather, even though) you don't have all the answers. Having the sorts of relationships where it is natural for you to talk about big things of life – and to allow others to help you.

If you arrived unsure what evangelism is, I hope that you can see that evangelism is about sharing ourselves with others. Openly and honestly. About seeking and talking about the good news in the midst of life. That prayer can change things. That our faith can help us through. That God knows us and our stories. And evangelism is about making room in your lives for others.

If you wouldn't call yourself a Christian, I hope you've heard that our faith helps sustain and hold us as Christians. That we don't have all the answers and that is ok. That our faith is worth celebrating and deepening. That God sees, knows, values you.

Conclusion

So, in conclusion, remember my upside-down stories. Of vulnerability and openness and genuine friendships. Remember Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman where he saw her as a person and asked for her help. Remember that we're made for relationships, and seek to develop mutual and reciprocal relationships with people whom you care deeply about: Christians and non-Christians alike.

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