

RATHER NOT CONVERT; RATHER YOU

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KOINONIA

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Rather Not Convert; Rather You
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Acts 2:14-21

...Pray...

Okay, you know how you did that one thing years and years ago and no matter how much distance you get from it or how much you convince yourself that it's okay now, you just can't quite seem to forgive yourself or you can't quite let it go, whenever you think about it? And you know how every family has some ugly piece of history, something that no one really wants to talk about, revisit, look at, etc? Or you know how all of us have one part of our body that no matter how hard we try we just can't learn to love. And you know how every institution or nation or sports franchise or church has that one (or two or ten) mistakes it made back in the day that it just can't live down?

Do you all know what I'm talking about? Those things. I call them the "I'd-rather-nots." I'd rather not think about that. I'd rather not look at that. I'd rather not tell you about that. I'd rather not EVER have to relive that. The "I'd-rather-nots:" the stuff we look away from, the stuff that causes awkward silence at the dinner table, the stuff that makes us sweat in a bad way, the stuff that takes our breath away in a bad way, the stuff that haunts us, the stuff that won't let us go but we can't live with either. The "I'd-rather-nots:" torturous, unforgettable, totally regrettable, yucky stuff.

I've got a case of the "I'd-rather-nots" when it comes to Christian Evangelism. And I suspect, given what I heard about Thursday night Bible Study and what I've experienced with all of you during my year and a half as one of your pastors, I suspect that I'm not the only one in this room with a big messy hairy scary case of the "I'd-rather-nots" when it comes to Christian Evangelism. But in case

I'm wrong and my suspicions are off, I'd like to hear some feedback from you during this part of the sermon. Give me a little verbal something if you, like me, have the following "I'd-rather-not:"

In certain public spaces, particularly if I'm surrounded by people who have been wounded by the church, I'd rather not admit that I'm a Christian.

I'd rather not ever have another person approach and ask me if Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior.

I'd rather not have to look at nor admit to all the rape, pillage, exploitation and murder that has historically accompanied people of my religion trying to Christianize the globe.

I'd rather not be judged by other Christians who think their version of Christianity is the truth, the whole truth, and only truth: HELP ME GOD.

The history of Christian Evangelism has me bound up and all kinds of backed up with a case of the "I'd rather nots." It is not a pretty history. It's a long history of risky trial and huge error. Errors that weren't just blips on a screen, but errors like holy crusade wars that left thousands upon thousands of people dead and errors like witch-hunts that mutilated female bodies in public and psychologically terrorized children as they watched their mothers burn at the stake, errors like missionary projects that stripped indigenous cultures of their languages and local customs, their land and their spiritual heritage, errors like contemporary evangelicals hosting anti-gay movements that violently target same-gender-loving human beings because apparently gays get in the way of God being able to be God. I'd rather not. Hear about it. Look at it. Remember it. Own up to it. And I sure as hell don't want to perpetuate it.

And the truth is: I don't have to and neither do you. We don't get to opt-out of Evangelism, because if we believe in the Good News of Jesus Christ and member ourselves one-to-the-other in this place, there's no escaping that. But we can escape perpetuating the historical horrors of Christian Evangelism by learning from our mistakes and doing it differently. That's what it means to ethically inherit something: whether it's a family value, a religious tradition, an institutional history, whatever. To ethically inherit something—and we all inherit stuff just by living; what we do with what we inherit is what determines whether we are living ethically or not—to ethically inherit something means to assess what we've got, learn from the mistakes, learn from what works and make it our own. And I would say it's about high time that critical thinking, loving Christians step up to the plate and turn this Evangelism thing on its head, turn this Evangelism thing into something Godly instead of something devilish. And what feels like the key piece in moving in that direction is whether we can see...and I mean really see without absolving or watering it down...whether we can see what's been wrong with evangelism for so long.

Conversion has been the wrong thing.

Conversion: point A to point B approaches to evangelism.
Conversion: you are wrong, we are right approaches to evangelism.

From savage to saint.
From difference to same.
From wrong to right.

The emphasis on conversion has been the wrong thing. Now conversion has an emphasis on change at its core, and a relationship with the living God will bring about change, but we've been going evangelizing for change in the wrong way. For too long Christian Evangelism has been about not seeing people for who they are but who we think they should become. Or worse, seeing them for what we see as all

their weaknesses and errors and relating to them from a place of judgment and arrogant desire to change them into our idea of who they should be. Just this week a UCC female, liberally-minded, senior minister of a long standing ONA congregation came out with an article slamming those who are spiritual-not-religious, claiming that those of us who are in a religious community are somehow better than spiritualists. At the heart of her article was an attempt to convert those who haven't joined a religious community. Now I agreed with almost 80% of her writing, but at the end of the day I think she fell into the same pattern of arrogant judgment that has characterized Christian Evangelism historically. Conversion attempts always begin with a judgment that someone is wrong, off, insufficient, or somehow incomplete. I don't know about you but I've never felt the spirit of God come over me while being told something is wrong with me. In fact, that's about the quickest way for my heart to shut down. So why the heck have we gone about evangelism this way?

"You're a total sinner, heathen, horrible, Godless person. Have you accepted the Lord into your heart?" Seems backwards to me...

So if conversion shouldn't be at the center of evangelism, what should?

Connection. Connection that takes incarnation and Pentecost seriously. Connection that takes literally that God has poured out the Spirit upon all flesh: on sons and daughters prophesying, young men visioning, old men dreaming dreams, and spirit-filled women. Connection that hinges on the assumption that God is already in every person, every culture, every time and every place. Connection because where two or three God-filled are gathered, more God is in the midst. Connection because the grace of God is more evident when we share our stories instead of prioritizing just one. Connection because harmony is more beautiful than monotone. Connection

because being touched, seen, heard, understood and cared for is what does the Body good.

One of the reasons we need to become a viral church as part of our Evangelism strategic priority is because we need to connect in ways that are an integral everyday part of our culture if we want to be faithful in this culture. We don't need to become a viral church to recruit people for our pews or to convert the secular masses to Christianity. We need to become a viral church because God is already on the web and we need God. We need to participate in God wherever God manifests because we are people of faith. And there are people on the web who might find God more deeply in their lives if they connected to what we got going on. We need to offer a strong FCC presence on the web, go viral, all that. We need to hear and be heard on facebook. We need to see and be seen on Twitter. We need to love and be loved on text. Not to convert. To connect.

When we spiritually connect, lives change in profound ways, not in a conversion kind of way where someone goes from Point A to Point B, but in never-ending mysterious cycles. Spirit-filled connections touch all parties. Spirit-filled connections heal and soften. Spirit-filled connections make suffering more intolerable and justice more palpable. Spirit-filled connections expand our worldviews and sharpen our compassion. Spirit-filled connections move us beyond fights about what's right to interactions that are in themselves redemptive.

Connection, not conversion. We will be changed in the evangelism I am talking about—make no mistake about it. We will be changed not one-to-one but all-in-all, changed by the spirit connecting us, not in violent ways, not in ways that ask us to leave behind who we are to become something we are not. We will be changed by the love that comes with genuine spirit filled connection, the spirit that pulls us together in the most expected and unexpected ways: through invitation, through undeniable desire,

through common interests, through surprising convergence, through shared hope, through common rage, through curiosity, through belief, through doubt, through generosity, through need. Connection changes us because that is its nature. But conversion as it's been historically conceived has been horrid at connecting. Perhaps we got it backwards.

Let's put connection at the heart of our Evangelism. Yeah? Connect here in the sanctuary. Connect on the net. Connect through your hearts. Connect with your heads. Connect here. Connect there. Connect everywhere.

So yes, we will still baptize. Not to signify a conversion, but to acknowledge a connection. And yes, we will still reach out to people needing a church home. Not to convert them, but to connect with and become alongside them. And yes, I want you to invite people to church. Not because you think a person is lacking something, but because that person could know more God through connecting here and we could know more God through connecting with that person. And yes I want you to post sermons or biblical passages or spiritual insights on facebook, not to convert your secular friends or church-gone family members, but to connect what's meaningful to you to those out there who might need to connect to something beyond you, through you, because of you. I'd rather that.

Speaking of "rather that"...

Because I want to keep it balanced, let's end on some "I'd rather"...

I'd rather see and touch than judge and condemn.

I'd rather listen deeply to you than hear my own ideas about you.

I'd rather find where God already is than project where I think God isn't.

I'd rather be surprised by God here in your presence

I'd rather give thanks to God because of your presence

I'd rather glide into God through your presence.
I'd rather feel God by taking in your presence.
I'd rather you: your presence, your power, your story, your
struggle, your gifts, your heartbreaks, your songs, your
prayers, your laughter, your sobs, your need, your fight.

Your life: I'd rather connect to that than convert to
anything.

Amen.