

The Reverend Kirk T. Berlenbach
Patronal Festival
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I stood on the corner in the damp chill of the February night. The bustling Friday crowds hurried past on either side. In my hand I clutched a handful of tracts. They bore titles like "Are you Saved?" and "Where will you go when you die?" I was supposed to hand out every single one of them, but even though I wanted to get off this corner and go out and enjoy the weekend, I had yet to pass on a single one.

In case you were wondering this is not my usual Friday night routine. It wasn't my usual routine twenty three years ago either, which is why I was having such a hard time with it. I had taken a semester off from college to go and live in Vancouver, British Columbia with a Christian missionary group call Youth With a Mission or YWAM for short. For five months I lived in their community in the heart of the red light district. Our mission was to minister to the large number of teen runaways who congregated in the city. They came to Vancouver for one reason- because the ocean kept it warm in wintertime. Yet there were countless reasons why they left home. Once they were out on the street some got into drugs. Others worked as prostitutes. Some did both. But whatever their situation they all needed help. And help is what we gave them. We gave them food and temporary shelter. We gave them advice or a shoulder to cry on. We tried to be a beacon of stability and hope in the midst of a chaotic and dangerous existence. Yet YWAM's concern didn't stop with their physical needs and emotional comfort. The group was also concerned with saving their souls. We had altar calls at our weekly worship services. We were also taught to memorize the "Sinner's Prayer" so that we could lead others in saying it and we were taught to hand out tracts. And that's how I ended up on a corner of Granville Street on a Friday night in the middle of February. I was doing my duty even though, if I was perfectly honest, I didn't believe in it.

You might share my discomfort with such an approach. Perhaps you've been on the receiving end of an overly zealous effort to save your soul. Or maybe you've seen one too many "Evangelists" on TV preaching at the top of their lungs about the need to accept Jesus as "your personal Lord and Savior." Maybe you've even tried handing out tracts or asking people if they've been "born again" like I did and found that it just didn't feel right. Whatever the case most of us now perceive evangelism as being formulaic and aggressive.

That's not just sad. It is tragic. Once again a small but vocal minority of Christians have managed to impose their own narrow definition on the rest of us. As a result, the very idea of sharing our faith has become taboo- like money or politics it is just not an appropriate subject for polite conversation. And so we keep our faith to ourselves.

We have to get past that aversion. Being an evangelist is an integral part of what it means to be a Christian. Part of our duty as Christians is to lead others to the faith. And so both as individuals and as a parish we must be willing to share our faith with others. Today's lessons and collect remind us of the call. The collect tells us that Timothy was called to do the work of an evangelist. In the lesson Paul exhorts him not to "...be ashamed then of testifying to our Lord." And Acts tells us that as a result of Paul and Timothy's work that, "...the churches were strengthened in faith and grew in numbers daily." Clearly, to live up to the standards set by our patron saint we must become more comfortable with our role as evangelists.

To begin with, your faith is worth sharing. It is rich and deep. I know that you feel the presence of G-D. I have seen how it gets you through the worst that life can offer and et, because of your

faith, you do not lose hope. I have seen how your love for G-D leads you to generously give to meet the needs of others, even going so far as to give up your vacation time so that you can travel far away to build houses or give medical care to people in need. I see the evidence of your faith all the time and I am humbled by how truly deep it can be. Yet I also know that this same group of remarkable Christians doesn't always feel comfortable with the idea of talking about that faith might make a positive difference in someone else's life.

If we want to share our faith without being pushy or phony then we have to understand that the real work of evangelism is not simply about saving souls. Evangelism is not about changing opinions, it is about changing lives. Some would rightly respond that talk is cheap and that the most meaningful way to share your faith is through actions and not words. It is true that many who mostly loudly espouse Jesus with their words do very little to actually live as he directed. But action isn't always enough. Even our most noble efforts can become even more meaningful expressions of faith when enhanced by explanation. When I was at YWAM I was much more comfortable working to help with the physical and emotional needs of the kids we ministered to than I was with talking with them about the reason I felt called to do it. Yet I cannot help but wonder what positive difference it might have made had just occasionally taken that extra step to share the reason why I felt called to be doing it.

Of course we must find the right opportunity. Someone who is really hungry won't care why you are giving them something to eat, they just appreciate the food. Indeed, as anyone who has done mission work can tell you, it is far more important to meet immediate physical needs before you would ever broach the subject of faith. But once you have done that, it is not inappropriate to share why you are offering help. Revealing that the reason you are there giving of yourself to help a stranger is because you feel called by G-D is not a hollow platitude. When it comes from the heart such a statement of faith can have a powerful impact leading the person who hears it to wonder what difference G-D might make in their life.

If you are better off because G-D in your life then it only stands to reason that you would also want to help others come to know it too. And if this parish has made a difference in your life, don't you think it could also help others as well? If we are going to grow into our role as evangelists then we must be willing to talk meaningfully and passionately about our relationship with G-D and about our church. And there's no reason, other than our own discomfort, why we shouldn't. If faith has been helpful in your life, then it is worth sharing. If G-D has sustained you through some tough times, why shouldn't you want to pass that experience on to others? By the same token, if St. Tim's has become a place where you find meaning, nourishment and support, why wouldn't you share it?

The evangelism to which most of us are called takes place not on street corners or with strangers but within the bounds of our daily lives. There are no formulas- no set timing or way in which you should broach the subject. You don't need to go out of your way to bring faith into the conversation. The key is not to avoid it or pass up opportunities to share the good things G-D has done in your life with your friends, family, coworkers and neighbors. You don't have to be a great speaker. You don't have to offer clever arguments or formulas of doctrine. You don't have to have all the answers to the questions they might ask in response. Just talk about what you truly believe and share those things that you hold most dear. When they see that you care about them enough to really share something of yourself, they will listen. And when they listen they might just begin to believe that this G-D you're talking about has a plan for their lives as well. After all, that's what evangelism is all about. Our faith is something worth sharing. Like St. Timothy's G-D has called us to be evangelists. Let's get out there and talk about it.