

“Evangelical is Good News!”

*(Part II of III in the sermon series, “Our Reformation Faith”)
Isaiah 45:1-7; Matthew 22:15-22*

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, October 22, 2017, Proper 24, dedicated to memory of Ray Pendell, a member of our congregation for 56 years who passed to eternal life on October 12, to all the evangelicals in our tradition of Christianity who saw the connection between personal salvation and social salvation and always to the glory of God!

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Question: What do **YOU** and Jonathan Edwards, Lyman Beecher, Charles Finney, Dwight L. Moody, Billy Sunday, Washington Gladden, Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Jim Wallis, Walter Brueggemann, Tony Campolo, Jimmy Carter, James Dobson, Rich Nathan, Marcus Borg, Rick Warren and Tim Ahrens share in common? Answer: **Each one of us is an Evangelical Christian.** I might add – 7 of the 17 are also Congregationalists, eight of 18 if I count you.

For some of you in the room, you are swallowing hard because the last thing you wish for your life of faith is to be identified with one or more of these white male Protestant pastors. (Hopefully I am not one of those on your list). But, for this morning, I want you to consider that being “evangelical” is a really good thing. I want you to breathe in this simple truth – evangelical is “good news.” While some or even most of the names I have listed may cause you to think of anything **BUT** good news, I want you to step into the shoes of “good new” faith which you wear and walk with me for the next few minutes through this truth of our faith: We are evangelical.

The word “Evangelical” comes from the Greek word *euangelion*, meaning “the good news” or the “gospel.” It is everywhere in our DNA as Christians. Each of the gospels is presented as authored by “Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – all Evangelists.” There is no getting away from this simple

truth. We are heirs of evangelical faith – and that is a very good thing. Why? Because an evangelical faith is one which joyfully, cheerfully, and unapologetically declares and lives the values of Christian faith found in the four gospels (the four books of “Good News”). Evangelical faith speaks of the way of salvation – which simply means to be healed in the love of Jesus Christ.

But, the point in which good news becomes negative for so many Christians is when someone tells us exactly how this process must be experienced in order to be a Christian at all. We hear from them, based on John 3, “you must be ‘born again.’” To be “born again” names the event or process through a person gives himself or herself to Jesus. This event or process changes their lives and fills them with meaning. For those who experience this, it is a beautiful experience of faith and conversion. But, it is not always the way a Christian comes to their faith – nor need it be!

Here is the rub. Most “born again” Christians clearly self-identify and measure the truth of their faith by the following beliefs: The Bible is inerrant, Jesus died for our sins and if you take four specific steps you can be forgiven and believe in him; Creation happens as found in Genesis and there is no evolution; Abortion is a sin and maybe even as bad as murder, homosexuality is sinful, Christianity is the only way of

salvation and coupled with this, other religions are explicitly condemned and vilified.

Not all born-again Christians affirm all of the above. But in polling done across the past 30 years, consistently, most do. Can you see where Evangelical as it is associated with the way to salvation (and conversely with the way to hell) can be received as negative by you, people you love and know and certainly by others with whom you work and live?

I share a story of one woman who came to me before joining the church many years ago concerned about “becoming a Christian.” She said, *“Rev. Tim, the people I work with have felt so hurt, so judged and so condemned by people who call themselves ‘born-again’ Christians that they feel all Christians are bad. I worry that if they find out I am a Christian, they will avoid me and our friendships will end. I don’t want to feel bad about following Jesus. So, I don’t tell anyone I go to church. I don’t want to be judged for loving Jesus and feeling his love in my life. What do I do?”* I was heartbroken to see her preparing for becoming Christian with trepidation and fear in her heart. It was truly heart-breaking.

Can anyone here relate to this young woman? Have any of you felt at work, on Facebook, or in your family – perhaps when going home for Thanksgiving or Christmas – that being

Christian seems to be “bad news” not “good news” in your circle of family, friends or co-workers?

One of the most staggering statistics in polling in recent memory is this one – taken as exit polls at the General Elections in 2012 and then again in 2016. People who identified as White Evangelicals were asked if personal morality mattered in a president? More specifically if the person they elected to the highest office in the land needed to live a moral, upright and honest life in order to serve as President. In 2012, similarly mirroring the answers of elections going back 30 years, people by an 85% to 15% margin felt that the president should be a moral and upright person to serve as President. But, in 2016, the same people asked this question said that this mattered in a completely flipped statistic. Only 15% said it mattered if the president was moral and upright as a person. Wow!

In four years morality literally was erased as a qualification for the presidency. I’m tempted to say – those who were polled sold their souls to the devil. But, instead I will say, such polling says more about the people answering the polls than it does about the person holding the highest office in our land. I wonder if this will flip back in the 2020 general election? Let’s keep an eye on this...

Remember at the beginning of the sermon I identified all of us as Evangelicals? I named quite a few people with whom you probably share little in common – in terms of the beliefs you hold and the faith you practice. One of the keys to understanding the shift is found right in this church. That's right. It was here, in the pulpit of First Church and the writings of our pastor in the late 1890's and early 20th Century that the shift happened among Protestant Evangelical Christians. There was defining timeframe when the shift happened.

Our seventh pastor, Dr. Washington Gladden, was the lightning rod of the change. Conservative Evangelicals declared that unless you were born again, you would not receive salvation in Christ Jesus. But, Dr. Gladden, a Liberal Evangelical essentially wrote and preached that individual salvation matters. As Christians we need to claim Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. But, he added - social salvation is equally important. Unless we work for the salvation of all – which means to feed the hungry, house the homeless, educate all children equally, bring justice to workers who paid poorly and treated badly in the workplace, personal salvation is meaningless. Personal and Social Salvation must always exist in symbiotic relationship. Don't claim you are saved unless

you can make the same claim for your sisters and brothers who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

This is the Social Gospel.

This did not go over well with Billy Sunday and the legion of “born again” Christians who trumpeted their form of evangelism. They believed people were poor because they were sinners. They didn’t believe they were poor because they suffered from social injustice. So, if they repented of their sins, born again, baptized and gave their lives to Jesus, he would raise them from the filth and squalor of their conditions.

There was no symbiosis between personal and social salvation – which is actually – in my mind – not a full gospel.

Something is really missing in this interpretation of our Christian faith. I believe it is Jesus who is missing.

This split has existed in some way, shape or form ever since.

Another way to say it is this. The Social Gospel believes (as I believe as well) that salvation is more about this life than an afterlife. In his last book, Convictions, the late Marcus Borg wrote his 11 convictions about what matters most written after 50 years of scholarly work and on the edge of death. It is a powerful collection of convictions shared by one of the

greatest scholars and teachers known to us in late-20th and early 21st Century Christianity.

Dr. Borg wrote that we go through three stages of experience. First, there is pre-critical naivete. Second, there is critical thinking. Finally, post-critical affirmation. These stages of experience apply to all of life itself. They also happen in the life of faith. In the first phase, we hear the Christian stories as children. For those of us who never did hear them as children, we receive them with naïve ears and hearts as adults. Second, we then wonder what is true and what is not true. We begin to question and test what the adults around us have taught us. Finally, we reach that stage which is all about affirmation and conviction. What do I believe? What do I hold true as true for the faith?

Let's apply this to salvation. As a child, you may have had a hell, fire and brimstone Evangelical or Pentecostal preacher in your life – (or from one or more parents in your home). That “preacher” (most likely a “he”) may have told you that you either choose the way of life and salvation in Jesus Christ, or you would go to hell. So, the promise of heaven or the threat of hell. Which would you choose? But, as you became older you applied critical thinking to all you had heard. You may have asked, “As I hear the words of Jesus, I feel the love of God – not God’s eternal damnation. What’s going on here?”

Finally, as you reach the stage of affirmation and conviction, you say, “This is what I believe about God as I have come to know God in Christ. I believe God IS LOVE. I believe Jesus calls me to love God, and love my neighbor as I love myself.”

I believe, living faith for the afterlife actually takes us further away from Jesus. When Christianity becomes wrought by convictions about Eternal Life, it becomes a religion of requirements, rules and rewards. We have to do certain things to get to heaven. And the ones who set up the structure often lose track of Jesus in the process. It also sets up our faith as a contractual faith – rather than a covenantal faith. If we do our part, God will do God’s part. That is not the way it works. Also, the afterlife faith approach separates people into the “saved” and “the unsaved.” Who wants to stop our service today and figure out which one of us is going to heaven and which one of us is going to hell? I am interested in that. If you are, you are in the wrong place. Finally, we focus on the afterlife, we miss this life. We become fearful of living (or make those around us fearful of living – or both). Such anxiety, added to the high anxiety of our times, misses the point of Good News Faith!

I agree with Marcus Borg who says being Evangelical, and salvation itself is about Transformation. How are we changing in the midst of our walk of faith? How are we being liberated

from that which binds us and holds us back? How are we – like Moses and the people of Israel moving from slavery to freedom? How are we moving from exile to home? How are we moving from darkness to light? How are we in right relationships with people? With all creation? With the food we eat, the drinks we drink, and the people who pick our crops and serve us at our dinner tables? How are we being saved from the sins that hold us back and keep us from fullness of life – this life – not the afterlife? Transformation is a process of living life and a real and vibrant faith (drawn from Marcus Borg, Convictions: How I Learned What Matters Most, Harper One, NY, NY, 2014, pp. 53-75).

By living into salvation in this way, we come to know that salvation is truly more about LIFE than the afterlife. If I live for Life – mine and the lives of others all around me – I live in the present moment and I live for God. If I live for Afterlife – I live for a selfish version of a yet unknown future and I can lose track of God, my neighbor and my very own soul.

It has been my honor and sad blessing to preach from this pulpit at hundreds of funeral and memorial services. I can tell you that as I have been honored to lift up the memories of individual life stories, the amazing people of whom I have spoken have lived life for God. One after another has been a witness for Christ in this world. I have not worried about their

eternal souls. They took of that in life by living for God. They didn't fret about the future. They lived for God in the here and now and eternal life took care of itself. They are in eternity with God. I am sure of that.

So, my "Good News," Evangelical Brothers and Sisters - live for God. Live for your neighbor and yourself – in healthy relationship to Jesus Christ. If you do, life will be better and your afterlife will take care of itself. And that is truly evangelical faith! That is Good News! Amen.

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