

Pam Driesell is a pastor in Atlanta and she tells about her experience going into a University of Georgia football game. She says it was a beautiful fall day in Athens, GA when she was with the throng of people pouring into Sanford Stadium for the game. That is when they came upon the "Evangelist."

The Evangelist was a very large man positioned just outside the gate holding up signs about the eternal damnation of drunkards and shouting out Bible verses about the doom of all kinds of people. That was when one of those eternally doomed drunkards confronted the "evangelist."

"Let me get this straight," he slurred as he invaded the man's personal space. "I'm going to hell because I've had too many beers??? Well...what about all the Big Macs and fries you've been eating, big boy?" He asked as he poked at the man's big belly and smugly laughed.

Obviously feeling self-satisfied with his own theological insight, the drunk fan continued, "Seriously, BIG BOY, what about GLUTTONS?" The "evangelist" stuck to his script proclaiming all drunkards hell bound and did not react to the invasion of his personal space.

He did not even make eye contact. It was as if he didn't see the man at all. That's when the drunkard got right up in his face. "Maybe I'll see you there," he said, poking him now in the chest and laughing a sinister laugh.

Pastor Pam Driesell says that it wasn't funny. It was intense. It was sad. It was disturbing. Two people treating each other with contempt, hurling Bible verses like verbal grenades at each other.

One of her Jewish friends looked at her, the minister in the group, and in an attempt to ease the tension, laughed and said, "You see why I'm not Christian."

Most of us have encountered "the Evangelist" in our lives somewhere. For me, it was when I was a student at Clemson. We called him the Harcombe preacher. This man would stand outside the main dining hall during the day and yell at us about how most all of us were going to hell. Maybe as Clemson students we were.

Occasionally a group of students would self-righteously try to challenge him but it was never a pretty sight. Most of us just passed by on the other side because we were more concerned with eating than we were with theological dialogue.

As Pastor Pam Driesell notes, maybe the "evangelist" was the roommate you had in college who was one of the kindest people you've ever known, but there was this condescending way she spoke to you when it came to issues of faith. You had this sense that when she said she was "praying for you," it wasn't the same as what you meant when you prayed for her.

She dropped subtle hints that your faith wasn't quite the real thing, like hers. She was always quick to quote a Bible verse in the nicest possible way that somehow made you feel less than. You sensed she was indeed concerned about your eternal fate and wasn't sure that you were "in" at all.

Evangelism in the worst definition is when someone comes at you with an agenda. An agenda to get you to believe like they do. An agenda to get you to say the right words and pray the right prayers so that they can claim you as one of their converts. An agenda where they want to use you for their purpose. That is evangelism at its worst. I imagine that many of us have experienced that type of evangelism at times.

But evangelism simply means the sharing of God's good news. Evangelism comes from the Greek word which means "good news." Evangelism is sharing God's good news. Evangelism comes in many forms. And one could argue that the evangelists whose stories I shared may not have been sharing much good news.

So let us look into today's gospel lesson to learn something about what evangelism is.

In the text that we read John the Baptist is standing with two of his disciples. You see, John had disciples too. John had people who followed him. But when John sees Jesus he directs the attention of his disciples toward Jesus. "Look," John says, "Here is the lamb of God!" So the first aspect of evangelism is pointing people away from you and toward Jesus. The first aspect of evangelism is pointing people away from you and toward Jesus.

Getting back to the gospel story, the two disciples of John see Jesus and they start to follow him. Jesus responds to their following him by asking them, “what are you looking for?” Jesus asks them what they are looking for.

So the second aspect of evangelism is finding out the needs of the other person. Unlike in the opening example I shared of the evangelist who cared little about the people he was “preaching to,” in the case of Jesus he wanted to know something more about his followers than their name or their occupation or how many children they had.

Jesus wanted to know what his followers valued. He wanted to know what they were searching for. He wanted to get to know them as real individuals with real needs, wants, and desires.

So we learn so far that evangelism is about directing attention to Jesus and not to ourselves and that evangelism is about listening to what the other really is searching for. Listening to them first.

Next in our story, these two followers ask Jesus where he is staying. Jesus does not dodge the request. Jesus takes them to the place where he was staying. Jesus does not hide who he is and what he is.

So the third aspect of evangelism is being honest about who you are. Not trying to be something that you are not. Not trying to hide your own true self and your own struggles and challenges. In other words, being very real with the people that you encounter.

So evangelism is about keeping focus on Jesus and not on you, it’s about really listening to the other, and evangelism is about being honest with who you really are. The next piece of this story which is very clear is that Jesus shows amazing hospitality. Jesus does not turn people away.

Jesus comes upon Philip and what does he say to Philip? He tells Philip to come and follow me. So being an evangelist is about showing hospitality to the stranger. Being an evangelist is about inviting someone and sharing with them from what you have. Evangelism is about being a giver rather than being a taker.

There is an interesting question that comes next in the story that we read. Upon hearing where Jesus is from, Nathanael asks Philip, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip responds by saying, "come and see."

Philip does not lash out at Nathanael. Philip does not get defensive. Instead, Philip says to Nathanael, "come and see." So being an evangelist is about inviting someone to come and see what you have seen and experienced.

So do you direct attention away from yourself? Then you may be a really good evangelist. Are you someone who likes to really listen to what others have to say and to learn from them? Then you may be a really good evangelist.

Are you someone who is willing to invite others into your home or are willing to give the shirt off of your back to help someone in need? Then you may be a really good evangelist. In fact, as you do these things you are sharing the good news of God's love through Christ.

But there is one more step you can take to be a really good evangelist. You can invite others to come and see what you have seen and felt. You can invite someone to come to your church. You can begin a new ministry opportunity that will create a way from people to connect to you and to God. You can invest yourself in a way that helps others and be open that you serve because Christ has equipped you to serve.

As I read this passage of Scripture and think about people that are here this morning, it seems to me that we have quite a few really good evangelists. People who know how to show hospitality. People who know how to deflect attention away from themselves. People who know how to listen to other people. People who know how to give and help others.

So I invite you to step up your game a little bit. If hospitality is a gift, invite some new people into your home. If listening is your gift, reach out to some people that others tend to ignore. Continue to reach out and help others.

Always be mindful to do these things not to draw attention to yourself. Be an evangelist that uses what you do well to direct others toward Christ. AMEN.

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-Driesell, Pam, "Who Wants to Be An Evangelist," http://day1.org/5468-who_wants_to_be_an_evangelist

-Text: John 1: 35-51

-Given: January 19, 2014 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)