

“The E(vangelism)-Word”

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Ephesians 1:1-14

Mark 1:1-11

[The Apostle Paul said,]

*We are called to be an honor to God's glory
because we were the first to hope in Christ.*

*You too heard the word of truth in Christ,
which is the good news of your salvation.*

Ephesians 1:12-13

Let us pray... O God,

Guide us to spread the Good News that you are always with us,
that we can find healing and forgiveness through you, and

that your Kingdom is a possibility as a social reality that can yet be.

Amen

Today, we received new members who re-affirmed their baptismal vows –
those vows made for them either as infants or by them as adult believers.

This is in accordance with the Great Commission by Jesus to his disciples
at the very end of the Gospel of Matthew 28...

*“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.
Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them
in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you;
and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.”*

Make disciples, baptize them. Teach them.

Another word for this is “Evangelism”...

“Evangelism” for many mainline traditional Christians. including the UCC.
has been kind of awkward – even an embarrassing part of our religion!

It brings to mind someone coming up to you to say,

“Are you saved, brother?” “Do you know you’re going to Heaven, sister?”

There is also the perception that emotional displays of sharing one’s witness
are phony, self-serving, or just plain manipulative.

I came across a playful take on that discomfiting word, ‘evangelism’,
about 10 years ago when I found a button that said, ‘The E-word’ –
meaning Evangelism.

The UCC has come to realize that we have to take evangelism seriously –
if we are to continue as a denomination.

The ‘God is still speaking’ initiative has been a very successful strategy
for doing this.

Perhaps we need to remember that ‘Evangelism’ literally means ‘Good News’
and we have had to continue to find new ways to talk about this ‘Good News’.

Willard, p.2

Being 'Evangelical' is literally part of the history of the United Church of Christ when you consider our denomination has its origins with four unique traditions that united in 1957.

Congregationalists of New England joined with the Christian Church that grew out of the early American frontier; And the Reformed Church composed of German immigrants to America, joined with the *Evangelicals* who had similar cultural roots in Germany. So, being 'evangelical' is part of who we are as the UCC.

If you are still uncomfortable with 'Evangelism', consider some other 'E-words' which might help you claim your 'evangelical' side...

EMMANUEL... Emmanuel is a Hebrew word that means 'God with us'...
'*O Come, O Come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel...*'

In the Gospel of Matthew, an angel of God appears to Joseph and uses the name, 'Emmanuel', to describe the child who was to be born to his wife, Mary. In the season of Advent and Christmas, we celebrate the birth of that child, Jesus Christ, the Son of God. So, we tell the story every year how God came to the Earth as one of us, born as a little baby to a poor, homeless family.

Whether you accept the Virgin Birth as literal or not, think of it...
The message of Christmas is that God spoke to us in terms of what is most precious to us.

God spoke to us in terms of what a 'baby' represents to humankind – hope for the future, innocence, and new life.

God identified with the ongoing Creation of human-kind that every generation brings the perspective of new eyes to the old problems with the optimism of not yet having failed to change things.

'Emmanuel' – 'God with us', is the message we share with Judaism, that God is with us no matter what we face in this life.

As Christians we believe this was supremely demonstrated by Christ dying on a cross in defiance of human violence, for the sake of all humanity – nobody lives or dies alone.

So, an E-word that is part of the Good News is 'Emmanuel' – 'God is with us.'

ELEISON... 'Eleison' is a Greek word that means 'Have mercy' – 'Kyrie, eleison ymas'. 'Lord, have mercy upon us.' God, help us.

This is an ancient prayer and a building block of the worship liturgy used by the Eastern Orthodox Church every Sunday.

Kyrie, eleison. Kyrie, eleison. Kyrie, eleison.

Willard, p.3

This is also called 'The Jesus Prayer' and is part of a tradition that seeks to take literally The Apostle Paul's challenge to the Thessalonians to 'pray without ceasing'.

There is a Greek monastery called Mt. Athos where the monks do just that – praying this prayer without ceasing.

'Kyrie, eleison' implies repentance, as one comes before God to seek mercy, but also teaches us to call upon God for help whenever, wherever, and for whatever we face as a challenge of body, mind, or spirit.

God through Christ is able to forgive us, to heal us, to help us, to save us, and that is what Jesus' name literally means: 'Yeshua', 'Yahweh saves' – 'God saves'.

Jesus linked healing with forgiveness when he tells a paralyzed person, "Your sins are forgiven. Rise, take up your pallet and walk" – and with it, giving us the responsibility to heal and forgive likewise.

And even as Christ forgave the injustice of death by crucifixion, so the cross is a defining example of God's love for us, to show that nothing can separate us from God.

So another E-word of the Good News is 'Eleison' – the mercy of God through Christ to forgive and heal and save us.

EPIPHANY... Epiphany is another Greek word, which describes the season in the Christian Year that follows Christmas and is associated with the Visit of the Three Magi and Jesus' Baptism, both signifying the manifestation of Christ as he began his earthly ministry.

In popular culture, an 'epiphany' represents an 'insight' – or a personal 'realization'.

How many times must a man look up Before he can see the sky?

...The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind The answer is blowin' in the wind

The Three Magi realized the goal of their journey, following the Star that led them to find the Baby Jesus.

In the Gospel of Mark, it is Jesus himself who is given a vision that manifests God's love for him and affirmation of his role as the Son of God, Christ, the Messiah.

But there's another E-word that brings out even more of what this is about: 'Emergent'.

In recent years, there has been a realization of an 'emerging' trend – not just a cry for renewal or change, but a recognition that there is a change, there is something happening.

Willard, p.4

We are seeing transformation in the judicial rulings that allow marriage equality in most states of America, 36 to be exact, and now Florida, too – which, by the way, took effect on the Day of Epiphany, January 6th.

We are seeing transformation despite the desperate acts of those who believe that ‘might makes right’ – transformation by those whose defiantly respond to violence believing, ‘the pen is mightier than the sword’.

The cross is significant here, too, because the cost of discipleship – for the sake of building up the Beloved Community, is often martyrdom.

Theologians like Phyllis Tickle and Brian McLaren have been proclaiming this in recent years, but so did Martin Luther King, and before him – Walter Rauschenbusch and Leo Tolstoy as well as Mohandas Gandhi – who was not even a Christian.

In his book, Jesus Through The Centuries, Jaroslav Pelikan described this emerging phenomena as a “rediscovery” of Christ the Liberator.

Christ as liberator provided a blueprint through his Sermon on The Mount for the Kingdom that is slowly, but surely coming – a Beloved Community on Earth as it is in Heaven, what Paul called being ‘in Christ’.

This emerging vision is transforming the world into a practical social reality of caring for and treating others in the ways we would have others care for and treat us.

So, Epiphany is yet another E-word for that emerging Good News that coincides with the most important E-word of our faith: Easter – the Resurrection of Christ, proving that God is with us no matter what, that God is a God of mercy, forgiveness, and healing no matter what, and that the Kingdom of God’s Beloved Community is coming no matter what.

*Yes, 'n' how many ears must [someone] have Before [they] can hear people cry?
Yes, 'n' how many deaths will it take till [we know]
That too many people have died?*

*The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind
The answer is [surely] blowin' in the wind.*

Amen

*Our lesson today from Ephesians 1:1-14, is a summary of the promises
and blessings associated with being 'in Christ' –
of being in the beloved community that the Church can become...*

- ^{1:1} From Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by God's will.
To the holy and faithful people in Christ Jesus in Ephesus.
- ² Grace and peace to you
from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.
- ³ Bless the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!
He has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing
that comes from heaven.
- ⁴ God chose us in Christ to be holy and blameless in God's presence
before the creation of the world.
- ⁵ God destined us to be his adopted children through Jesus Christ
because of his love.
This was according to his goodwill and plan
⁶ and to honor his glorious grace that he has given to us
freely through the Son whom he loves.
- ⁷ We have been ransomed through his Son's blood,
and we have forgiveness for our failures
based on his overflowing grace,
⁸ which he poured over us with wisdom and understanding.
- ⁹ God revealed his hidden design to us,
which is according to his goodwill
and the plan that he intended to accomplish through his Son.
- ¹⁰ This is what God planned for the climax of all times:
to bring all things together in Christ,
the things in heaven along with the things on earth.
- ¹¹ We have also received an inheritance in Christ.
We were destined by the plan of God,
who accomplishes everything according to his design.
- ¹² We are called to be an honor to God's glory
because we were the first to hope in Christ.
- ¹³ You too heard the word of truth in Christ,
which is the good news of your salvation.
You were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit
because you believed in Christ.
- ¹⁴ The Holy Spirit is the down payment on our inheritance,
which is applied toward our redemption as God's own people,
resulting in the honor of God's glory.

*Our Gospel lesson comes from Pastor Willard's translation of Mark 1:1-11,
and describes the events of Jesus' baptism and vision...*

**IN THE BEGINNING OF THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS CHRIST,
THE MESSIAH, THE SON OF GOD,
THE ONE WHO DESCENDED FROM GOD,
IT WAS ATTESTED TO BY ISAIAH THE PROPHET:
"LOOK HERE! I AM SENDING OUT MY ANGEL TO CONFRONT YOU
WHO WILL PAVE YOUR WAY.
A VOICE DECLARES IN THE WASTELAND,
'PREPARE THE WAY OF "THE ONE WHO IS";
MAKE THE PATH STRAIGHT FOR GOD.'"**

**JOHN THE BAPTIST APPEARED IN THE WASTELAND
AND HE ANNOUNCED A BAPTISM
FOR THE CHANGING OF ONE'S HEART & MIND
IN ORDER TO FORGIVE AS WELL AS BE FORGIVEN OF SINS.**

**AND PEOPLE JOURNEYED OUT TO HIM
FROM THE WHOLE REGION OF JUDEA,
ESPECIALLY FROM JERUSALEM;
AND THEY WERE BAPTIZED BY HIM
IN THE WATERS OF THE JORDAN,
CONFESSING THEIR SELFISH THOUGHTS & DEEDS.
NOW, JOHN WAS CLOTHED WITH CAMEL'S HAIR
AND GIRDED ABOUT THE WAIST WITH A LEATHER BELT;
AND HE ATE LOCUSTS, AND HONEY FROM WILD BEES.**

**AND HE PUBLICLY PROCLAIMED,
"AFTER ME COMES ONE WHO IS MORE POWERFUL THAN I,
THE THONG OF WHOSE SANDALS
I AM NOT WORTHY TO STOOP DOWN & UNTIE.
I AM BAPTIZING YOU BY WATER ALONE,
BUT HE WILL BAPTIZE YOU IN A GREAT SPIRIT,
THE LIFEBREATH OF HOLINESS."**

**AND THEN IN THOSE DAYS,
JESUS CAME FROM NAZARETH OF THE GALILEE;
AND WAS BAPTIZED BY JOHN IN THE JORDAN.
AND THE INSTANT HE ASCENDED FROM THE WATER,
HE SAW A SPLITTING OPEN OF THE HEAVENS;
AND THE GREAT SPIRIT LIKE A DOVE CAME DOWN TO HIM.
AND A VOICE CAME FROM THE OPEN HEAVENS:
"YOU ARE THE ONE WHO COMES FROM ME.
YOU ARE ONE WHO IS BELOVED; IN YOU I DELIGHT!"**