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The Unexpected Key to Evangelism

The direct route is not always the best route. C.S. Lewis says, for example, that if we want joy, the worst thing we can do is go out looking for it, because we will never find it. If we want joy, we need to forget about it and simply get to work on whatever God has given us to do. And joy will sneak up on us when we're not looking.

It's the same with evangelism. If we suddenly say, "We have to do evangelism", and try to do it, we'll be disappointed and frustrated--and, whatever we do, it's unlikely to be evangelism. But, as with joy, if we get to work on what God has given us to do already, evangelism may just sneak up on us. Hence I call this talk "The Unexpected Key to Evangelism.". So if we don't start with evangelism, where do we start?

We start with discipleship. Christians are called primarily to discipleship not to evangelism. But if we work on being disciples, I won't say evangelism will happen spontaneously, but it will at least be within our grasp.

Consider how this works in John 1:35-36. John the Baptist says to John and Andrew, "Behold the lamb of God!" and they follow—in other words they begin to be disciples. The very next thing is that Andrew goes to fetch Peter. But in telling him to come to Jesus, he is in fact evangelizing him. What is it that has made that possible? Simply that Andrew has become a disciple himself, so now he can invite someone else to be a disciple—which is the heart of evangelism.

The same pattern happens just a few verses later. Jesus evangelizes Philip, that is, he invites him to be a disciple. Now, because Philip is a disciple he can go off and evangelize Nathaniel--that is invite him to be a disciple too. You see the pattern?

So evangelism begins with discipleship. Once we have started on the road of discipleship, we can help others become disciples too—that is, we can evangelize them. But only disciples can make disciples. Only those who are following can help others follow. Only those who have experienced good news can share good news.

So let's think about discipleship.

Interestingly enough, the name by which the first Christians called themselves most often was "disciple." And the literal meaning of the word "disciple" is "learner" or "student." For them, it seems, when they thought of Christian faith, the thing that came to their mind first was not church or services or the ten commandments or being a good citizen, but learning. This suggests that for them the Christian community was first and foremost a school, and the Christian life a process of learning.

This raises some interesting questions. Where is this school? What is it for? What do you learn there? What are the teaching methods? Who are the teachers? And where are

classes held? How do you graduate? Is it true that the graduate programs are out of this world?

The easiest question to answer is: who is the teacher? The answer is Jesus. Many times in the pages of the earliest biographies of Jesus he is called “Teacher”, and a couple of times he calls himself by the same title.

But what is it that he teaches? What is the curriculum in this school Jesus is running? In the 1940s, Dorothy Sayers wrote a series of plays for radio based on the life of Jesus and called The Man Born to be King. In one of those plays she puts into the mouth of Mary Magdalene, one of Jesus’ first followers, the sort of thing Mary might have said to Jesus as she recalled the first time she met him:

“Did you know? My friends and I came there that day to mock you. We thought you would be sour and grim, hating all beauty and treating life as an enemy. But when I saw you, I was amazed. You were the only person there who was really alive. The rest of us were going about half-dead—making the gestures of life, pretending to be real people. The life was not with us but with you—intense and shining, like the strong sun when it rises and turns the flames of our candles to pale smoke. And I wept and was ashamed, seeing myself such a thing of trash and tawdry. But when you spoke to me, I felt the flame of the sun in my heart. I came alive for the first time. And I love life all the more since I have learnt its meaning.”¹

Sayers explains elsewhere: “What she sees in Jesus is the Life--the blazing light of living intensely.”

What did Jesus come to teach? He said on one occasion, “I have come so that people might have life and have it in all its fullness!”² Jesus is a teacher of life: he teaches us how to live as God’s person in God’s world in God’s way—and in the friendship of God. That is what people saw in Jesus. It is what gave him that unique quality of being fully alive; it is what attracted people like Mary to be his followers. They wanted to learn the life that they saw in Jesus.

Then I want to ask: *how* do you learn this kind of life? Some time ago I received in the mail a Bible study guide with a cover that looked like this (insert). To be honest, I did not spend a lot of time on it, because it seemed to me to be so deeply wrong. Jesus’ kind of learning never took place in a classroom with a blackboard and a big desk. The school of Jesus’ is not an academic kind of place, not a school for simply passing on information.

That then raises the question of how we learn? Jesus has a specially vivid image for this:

“Come to me,

¹ Dorothy L. Sayers The Man Born To Be King. Victor Gollancz 186-187

² The Gospel According to John, chapter 10, verse 10.

all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens,
 and I will give you rest.
 Take my yoke upon you
 and learn from me,
 for I am humble and gentle in heart,
 and you will find rest for your souls.
 For my yoke is easy
 and my burden is light.”

Matthew 11:28-30
New Revised Standard Version

There in the centre of this saying of Jesus is his offer to be our teacher: “Come . . . Learn of me.”

Then he gives us a powerful image to explain how we learn. He says, “Take my yoke upon you.” Before we came to Canada twenty-something years ago, I thought I understood this image. Jesus was saying he is the farmer, I am the ox, I submit to his yoke, and as I pull the plough he follows behind and directs me. Soon after we came to Canada, however, we went to a “living museum” where everything was done as it was a hundred years ago. There I saw something that completely changed my understanding of Jesus’ words: an ox-cart pulled by two oxen yoked together. It was explained to us that one use of the double yoke was to train young oxen. The farmer would link together an experienced ox and a young ox, and, as they pulled the plough together, the older ox would demonstrate how it was done: the discipline, the patience, the obedience, the stick-to-itiveness.

That, it seems to me, is what Jesus is saying by this picture. He is saying, I am already wearing the yoke of being God’s person in God’s world. Come and walk alongside me, share the yoke I’m already carrying, and I will teach you what I know.

What kind of learning would that be? It will be very different according to who we are.

But just as in those first days, it may well involve such things as:

- learning to be generous with what we have—perhaps more generous than we feel comfortable with at first;
 - learning to express our anger in more constructive ways;
 - learning how to forgive;
 - learning to come alongside someone at work or at school who is a bit of a misfit;
- Jesus the Teacher may also want to alter our career plans, or our retirement plans, or our holiday plans.

The list is endless: the lessons of Jesus’ school are as diverse as the situations people can find themselves in in the course of a week!

If this sounds daunting, it is important to note that there are encouragements here. For example, Jesus says he is a teacher who is gentle and humble. Many of us have had teachers who are not like that: they delighted in showing how clever they were, and in

putting down their students' mistakes. Jesus is the opposite: encouraging, nurturing, patient with our mistakes, taking time and trouble with us individually, to help us learn.

Then too he says his yoke is "easy." For anyone who has been a follower of Jesus more than about twenty-four hours, that sounds a little strange because being a Christian is often demanding. The original biographies of Jesus, from which this saying is taken, were written in Greek, the main language of Jesus' world, and I am told that the Greek word for "easy" can be better translated "well-fitting." Actually, we still use the word "easy" this way. If you are looking for a pair of new shoes, you might try a couple of pairs that really do not fit and then you find one that is just right, and you say, "That's a really easy fit." You mean the shoes are comfortable, they are right for you. This is the sense in which Jesus' yoke is "easy": it is well-fitting. After all, in those days, yokes were made one by one for individual oxen—there was no mass production. Jesus is saying, in effect, My yoke is made specially for you. There will be work and there will sometimes be difficulty—but the yoke will still be the one I made for you.

When Jesus originally said these words, he was issuing an invitation. He begins this saying with the words, "Come to me!" That wasn't a theoretical statement, and his hearers knew it. In my imagination, when he had finished, and the crowds were going home for supper, there were some who did not leave straight away. They pushed through the crowd and came up to Jesus, maybe a little hesitantly, and said something like this: "Jesus, you know what you said about being your student and sharing your yoke? I really think I'd like to do that. Is there some kind of application form? Do I have to get transcripts?" And whoever that person was, whatever they had done, wherever they had been in their spiritual journey, Jesus said (and in my imagination it's with a big smile and outstretched arms), "That's great. You're welcome. We're just going to have supper. Come eat with us and I'll introduce you to the others."

In one sense, nothing has changed since that first day, if it is indeed true that Jesus has returned from death and is alive forever. So we can speak to him just as if he were present here in the flesh. The offer of becoming his student, learning to live as God's person in God's world in God's way, still stands. And his invitation, "Come to me", is just as real today as it was 2,000 years ago. And now just as then he waits to see what we will say.

Let me offer you the sort of thing you may wish to say to Jesus in response to his invitation. If it makes sense to you, you may wish to echo these words silently in your heart to him.

Jesus –

Thank you for inviting me to join your school.
Thank you for offering yourself as my Teacher,
and for shaping a yoke just for me.

I do want to learn what it means to live
as God's person in God's world in God's way.
Please enroll me as a student in your school.

Teach me to share your yoke
and to be your faithful student day by day.
Amen

5. HOW DOES DISCIPLESHIP CONNECT TO EVANGELISM?

- A) One of the things on Jesus' curriculum for his disciples is that they should "Go, make disciples."
- B) If we are ourselves disciples, that is the first, most essential step towards helping others become disciples too. (I recall an Anglican Bishop in England being asked by a student how he could become a Christian. The bishop hummed and hawed and eventually said, "I think I would send you to someone wiser than myself"—which in my book is gross professional incompetence! Any disciple ought to be able to do better than that.) Many aspects of Christian faith are difficult for an outsider to grasp—well, frankly, many are difficult for an insider to grasp! But this idea that Christianity is being a student of Jesus Christ is one both insiders and outsiders understand easily, so it's an easy point of communication.
- C) Most who become Christians come through seeing it in the life of others. One friend of mine, Nicky, recalling her own coming to be a disciple, said:
 "As time went by, I started to notice that Sarah and the other Christians in the residence seemed to live by some kind of code which was different from everyone else. They seemed to have a lot of fun, but . . . They were different, and I noticed the difference and was impressed by it. As I continued to think and learn I scrutinized those around me to see if they really were living a life that was true to what they believed. I discovered that indeed they failed from time to time, but I was more impressed by their readiness to own up to their failure and to start again with new enthusiasm."
 These people were living as disciples . . . and someone was attracted.

In the next session, we'll think about what this process of helping others become disciples means for the life of a congregation. And I should warn you, it's not going to be easy! But, believe me, it is worthwhile, the most worthwhile thing we will ever do.