

Luke 5:1-11

¹Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, ²he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. ³He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. ⁴When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." ⁵Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." ⁶When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. ⁷So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. ⁸But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" ⁹For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; ¹⁰and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." ¹¹When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

¹Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, ²through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you-unless you have come to believe in vain.

³For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, ⁴and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. ⁷Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. ⁹For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them-though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. ¹¹Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

SERMON

There are things in this world I am positively evangelical about. For example, there are plenty of books I really enjoy and recommend, but there's a short list I regularly purchase and foist upon people because I don't just think they're good, I really believe the stories they contain have the ability to shift and change the reader's perspective in meaningful ways. "Cutting for Stone" by Abraham Varghese is one of those books. I think I've purchased and gifted or lent that book at least 16 times. Probably more.

I also have television shows and movies I want everyone and anyone to watch. I really do believe the world would be a much friendlier place if everyone loved The Great British Bake Off as much as I do. Not just because of all the delicious baked goods, but because everyone on that show is so kind to one another. It's a lovely, friendly, peaceful television show with basically no drama. The world would be better if we all emulated it a bit more.

There's more, right? Like, stuff I don't just like, but I recommend aggressively because I think it might actually improve the lives and perspectives of others. The Broken Earth Trilogy by N.K Jemisin for both being a fantastic speculative fiction series, but also one of the most insightful perspectives on race I've read in a long time. Harbison cheese, because it will convince you that you didn't know what cheese could really be until you ate this one. Hiking out in the Eagle Cap Wilderness, because it might be the most majestic and relatively untrodden corner of Oregon, and it will rest your appreciation for this beautiful world we live in. Rubberized hot water bottles as a means of staying comfortable through the cold, damp winter.

Apparently I'm a person of strong opinions, who knew?

And it's not just books and movies and cheese. I'm kind of evangelical about a few stories in the Bible, too. Mostly the women, because I really love them. I think Ester can inform our understanding of being brave in difficult political waters. Understanding Ruth can teach us about the depth of caring for one another through devastating life circumstances. Tamar and Jael and the daughters of Zelophehad and others teach us that righteousness is complicated, and doing the right thing is often a series of murky and shady choices. I'm a little evangelical about Jesus, but that's not so uncommon. It's not a terribly unique position to say that Jesus was a cool teacher and had some great things to say about loving our enemies and treating our neighbors as ourselves and all that. Even folks who don't believe Jesus is the son of God will agree to that. To my surprise, I've found that I'm somewhat evangelical about Paul. I don't agree with everything he wrote, and I'm ok taking him to task over some of it. But I think Paul is a phenomenal pastor, and I believe in my core that pastors would likely be a bit better at our jobs if we read Paul like a mentor.

But you know what I'm not evangelical about? The word evangelical. Or evangelize. Or evangelism. Or any variation therein. I do not like the term at all.

Now, there's a lot to unpack in this word, and I suspect a lot of you are with me.

There's a big obvious thing a lot of us have a knee jerk reaction to, right? That's big E, capitalized Evangelical. Here in the United States that word has come to almost mean something denominational, right? Like, there's the Catholic Church, the Episcopal Church, the Methodists, the Lutherans, the Presbyterians...and the Evangelicals. While they don't have a formalized, single denomination, we kind of hear it that way, right? And we associate it with certain theological doctrines. Things like, you go to heaven if you believe in Jesus and profess him as your personal Lord and Savior. A certain conservatism in social and ethical decision making: marriage between one man and one woman, the purity movement encouraging everyone to wait until they're married before having sex, giving a true 10% tithe to your church, a strong alignment with the pro-life movement. While not all evangelical churches or evangelical Christians are Republican, there's a loud voice from that edge of the church in support of the GOP right now, so there is a general political flavor to it. Of course Evangelical churches, like any of our congregations, aren't monolithic, so I'm painting with overlarge strokes here. There is variation within the group, and that's important to remember, but the word also means something, right?

And that association. The association you think of when you see the word "evangelical" in the newspaper or in a friend's facebook post...it ruins the word for me. I don't want to be evangelical or do evangelism in any way, because I don't want that association. In the United States this is a politically, theologically, and socially loaded term, not just for me, but for all of us. So, it's pretty understandable that we would have a reaction to it.

I suspect this is part of the reason so many Presbyterian churches no longer have "evangelism committees." Did you all ever have one? Yeah, a lot of churches used to have them in, in the classical sense of evangelism—telling other people about Jesus and your church and bringing them in the front doors. And this is what I want us to think about today. What does it mean to be evangelical about Jesus?

Because this is what he's telling Peter, right? Peter is out on a boat, having no luck, and along comes Jesus. First he tells him to toss his net over, and he catches a huge pile of fish. Then he's like, "I'm going to make you fishers of people." Not what Peter expected when he got up in the morning. If anything, I'd guess Peter and the others were pretty evangelical about fish, right? They were fishermen, after all. And every fisher person I know is incredibly evangelical about fish. Eating them, catching them, telling stories about it. The whole fishy works. Fishers love to fish! But Jesus comes in and basically says—I'm going to make you evangelical about something else. About people, and, fundamentally, about me and the kingdom I'm going to tell you all about. You're going to throw your nets out there and catch people for my kingdom.

And this is where it starts to go off the rails for me. Because I grew up with a really specific, and I'd hazard to say skewed version of what it means to catch people, or be an evangelist. Growing up, in my church, this story was all about catching people to convert their souls to save them from hell, right? You convert other people in order that they too might know Jesus and be saved. It was all about that get out of hell free card. And that taught me to dislike evangelism, because it felt so dang transactional. Like a spiritual pyramid scheme or

something. Even from a really young age I found this distasteful. But I didn't have another way to read this story or understand evangelism.

Today, I don't think that's what Jesus is saying, or at least I hope not. I wonder if what he meant was something a lot closer to how I feel about Cutting for Stone or Great British Bake Off, or for that matter the story of Ruth. I genuinely believe people are better off for these good stories, and good stories are something I get aggressively evangelical about. Because good stories teach us how to be human. They teach us things about how we should and should not treat one another. They show us how to love ourselves more deeply and with a genuine compassion. Good stories shape us into the people we want to be. And the life of Jesus is nothing if not a really, really good story.

And Jesus' story, it teaches us how to be human. I could be a fisher of people for that. The fundamental task that Jesus called Peter to is the same task each one of us, as disciples, has been given—to go out into the world, not to convert souls for Jesus, but to get aggressive about telling and sharing the stories that give our lives meaning and direction...because if it's good for us, it'll probably be good for someone else. Evangelism isn't about saving the souls of others, it's about making life meaningful and good, about learning to be more fully human together. And like an good book, who wants to keep that to themselves?