



Sharing Our Faith
Sermon by Pastor Sarah Rohde
Bethlehem Lutheran Church, St. Charles
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I was having a conversation with a chiropractor a few years ago, and we bonded over the experience that we've had, over and over again, when we share with others what we do for a living. She said to me, "I have to quickly clarify that I'm not one of *those* chiropractors, specifically the kind that reject all of western medicine" and I nodded in understanding. As soon as I say that I am a pastor to someone who knows nothing else about me, I, too, feel the need to try to explain the kind of pastor I am, or the kind of pastor I'm not. I usually try to say something that makes it clear that I don't have all the answers, I don't walk around this earth calling people to confession for all the bad things they've done, and, believe it or not, I've heard before and even used before a swear word or two. I can't tell you how many gatherings I've been at when someone says "what the..." and then immediately turns to me and apologizes. To be perfectly honest, all I want to do is swear right along with them, if only to make it crystal clear that I, too, am human and I'm in this work not to cast judgment but to help myself and others live this human life as truthfully and joyfully as God intends it.

This chiropractor and I connected over this feeling we often have of needing to explain our chosen professions because we both know full well there are all kinds of chiropractors out there, and all kinds of pastors out there.

It got me wondering this week if all of us might feel that way a bit when it comes to talking about, well, so many things these days, but especially about our faith.

Like chiropractors and pastors, there are so many kinds of Christianity in our world today, and even though we all use the name Christian to describe our

faith tradition, each Christian person, each Christian denomination, each Christian congregation emphasizes different core beliefs and different orientations toward religion and human life. Some emphasize sacraments and tradition, some emphasize personal acceptance of Jesus for salvation, some emphasize the pursuit of social justice, some emphasize community, or recovery, or holiness. And so, when we find ourselves in conversation with others, when others ask us – do you go to church? Are you a person of faith? Those are hardly questions with simple yes or no answers. If someone says to me, “Do you believe in God,” I want to say back, “Yes, let me tell you about the God I believe in.” If someone says “Are you a part of church?” I want to say in response, “Yes, and let me tell you about the kind of church I’m a part of.”

To think these are just black and white questions or answers really disregards how complicated and varied our faith identities can be. There’s a certain kind of cultural Christianity that speaks loudly in our society, but it’s not necessarily a Christianity I recognize. In fact, I’ve had many conversations with people over the last several years who come to share with me that they think they’re an atheist, and my first response to them is typically – tell me more about the God you don’t believe in. More times than not, they describe a God I struggle to believe in, too.

What I’m trying to get at here is that there is so much more behind the labels and words that we use to describe God, and to describe ourselves and our beliefs. And so much of passing on the faith to others is the work of translation. Especially as find ourselves in communities that are not nearly as homogenous as they maybe once were, the task before us is to figure out how we can share what we know and what we believe in a way that others can understand.

The part of Acts that we read this morning shows the apostle Paul trying to do this exact thing. To translate the way of Christ to different contexts and cultures. Right before the passage we read in worship, Paul is meeting with a

group of Jews in a synagogue, and the way he tries to introduce them to the way of Jesus Christ is to quote scripture. He turns to words that he knows they value and he uses those words to point them to the way of Jesus. Now, one thing that's really good to remember here is that Paul was still Jewish. So he wasn't trying to convert Jews to Christianity, per se; he was simply trying to lead Jews toward a certain way of life within Judaism, a way of life based on the life-giving love of Jesus Christ. As the story goes, some in that community were persuaded and became very devout, while others were upset, so much so that they formed a mob and set the city in an uproar. Sharing the gospel can be risky business.

Then Paul leaves the synagogue in Thessalonica and travels to Athens, Greece. Here his audience is not a bunch of faithful Jews, but rather a community of highly-educated philosophers, pagans, and artists. Paul preaches in front of the Areopagus, which in classical times, was where thinkers and philosophers met to discuss matters of religion and morals. And here he frames his message in a completely different way than he had in the synagogue. He doesn't turn to the ancient scriptures; that would've been disregarded right away. Instead, he uses philosophical language. He draws upon images and concepts that they know well, so that he can relate to them and to the world they inhabit, and also help them begin to see what's missing in their lives. So he connects with them first, he translates the way of Christ in a way that they can understand, and then he helps them see that they are chasing something that can only be fulfilled in God.

One of the things Paul illumines for them is the way in which they as unbelievers are religious – yes, I said that right. Paul says to these unbelievers, “I see how very religious you are.” Now Paul says this to them not because they believe in God but because they put their faith in something. In idols, in ideas, in status. You see here how Paul is creatively translating, naming for them and for us religion not as a static set of beliefs, but as the thing that constantly helps us examine where it is we put our trust. Now, similar to the Jews, some in the crowd

couldn't stand Paul's words, and others leaned in and could tell there was something there that they hadn't felt before. The text says that they became believers; I'd like to add to that just a bit because they had always believed in something, but upon hearing Paul's sermon and looking at their life in a new way, they became believers not in idols, not in their own philosophies, but in God, the one who brings resurrection out of death.

There is so much to learn in this passage about sharing the faith with others. We learn that we can't share it very effectively if we don't know something about the context that we are speaking to. We learn that there are different ways to communicate the same truth. Sharing about Jesus with a person in prison, or with someone who's been part of a Christian denomination their whole life, or with someone who is hearing the gospel for the first time, or with our dear little ones being baptized today – Henry and Charles – the things we'd want to say to each of those people is different, and yet each way can communicate God's love in a real and poignant way. I think we also learn in this passage that words that we think are self-explanatory – God, religion, church, Christianity – that all of them need interpretation. And we learn, and this is a really good reminder, that some will be drawn to our sharing, and others will not. At the end of the day, it's not our church, but God's. God – somehow and thankfully – holds it all.

There's a kind of game going around on twitter and other social media platforms – you've probably seen it by now if you're on those – and it challenges people to find a way to say “this is who I am without saying this is who I am.” For example, someone from Chicago, instead of saying “I'm from Chicago” might say “you never put ketchup on a hot dog!” Or someone from the Midwest, instead of saying “I'm from the Midwest” might say “Could I have a side of ranch with that” Or “It's supposed to snow today, maybe I'll put on some long sleeves.”

Our presiding bishop, Bishop Eaton, has recently adopted this twitter challenge and used it to put out a challenge to our whole church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America of which Bethlehem is a part. Our bishop is putting this challenge before us because she recognizes how vital it is that we, as Lutheran Christians, prioritize connecting with people who are not currently part of a church. And, like Paul, Bishop Eaton recognizes that that is going to require us to learn how to speak, to find words for our faith that connect with others who are less familiar or not at all familiar with it. And so she's put forth this question: How can we share with others that we're Lutheran without saying that we're Lutheran? Which is to say, how do we share about this church, this denomination, this rich theological tradition – all of which gets wrapped up in the word Lutheran for us – how might we share what it means to be Lutheran without using the “L” word?

I want to give you just a second to think about how you might respond to that. What comes to your mind?

Here's some of what's been shared online:

There's nothing I can do to deserve God's love. There's nothing I can do to NOT deserve God's love.

I am set free to live for something beyond myself.

Love God. Love Neighbor.

By God's grace I live.

God is with us when life is grand and when life is awful and everything in-between.

God loves me the same way God loves the person I can't stand.

Those are some ideas from Lutherans around the country. I would love to hear from you this week if you've thought about some ways that you might articulate the gospel, or the church to someone who's not yet a part of it. I deeply believe this is the work cut out for us as we move forward as a church. It's risky

and it's of our comfort zones, it's out of my comfort zone, too, to be clear. I think a big part of us wants to do what we do well, and just hope people find their way to us, and yet I think we all know deep down that we have something too good here, we're actively creating together a kind of intergenerational, inclusive, and service-oriented community that I know others are hungering to be a part of. Even though the pandemic has thrown so much of what we love about church up in the air, and even though none of us really know how we'll emerge from this time, what I do know is that, all along, the beliefs and values that we hold most dear have guided us as a congregation, and they are witnessing to the wider world of how seriously we take love of God and love of neighbor. Even in the wilderness, we still have a story to share. May God give us the words to make that story known in the world.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.