

## The “E” Word

John 4.12-25

Annual Meeting Sunday, January 26, 2020

Tim Phillips



### John 4.12-25 (the *Inclusive Bible*)

When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he went back to Galilee. He left Nazareth and settled in Capernaum, a lakeside town near the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali. In this way the prophecy of Isaiah was fulfilled:

“Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,  
the way to the sea on the far side of the Jordan,  
Galilee of the Gentiles:  
the people who lived in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
on those living in the land of the shadow of death  
a light has dawned.”

From that time on, Jesus began proclaiming the message, “Change your hearts and minds, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!

As Jesus was walking along the Sea of Galilee, he watched two brothers – Simon, who was called Peter, and Andrew – casting their net into the sea. They fished by trade. Jesus said to them, “Come follow me, and I will make you fishers of humankind.” They immediately abandoned their nets and began to follow Jesus.

Jesus walked along further and caught sight of a second pair of brothers – James and John, ben-Zebedee. They too were in their boat, mending their nets with their father. Jesus called them, and immediately they abandoned both boat and father to follow him.

Jesus traveled throughout Galilee, teaching in the synagogues, proclaiming the Good News of the kingdom of heaven and healing all kinds of diseases and sicknesses among the people. His fame spread throughout Syria, and people suffering from illnesses and painful ailments of all kinds – those who were demon-possessed, those who were epileptic, those who were paralyzed – were brought to Jesus, and he healed them. Large crowds followed Jesus, coming from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and Transjordan.

*[Hymn: “Tu has venido a la orilla – You Have Come Down to the Lakeshore.”  
I have abandoned my small boat;  
now with you I will seek other seas.*

I have abandonment issues. I don’t want to be abandoned. And I don’t want to abandon anyone else. Some of the heaviest guilt I carry around is about those times when I feel like I have abandoned someone or someones.

Perhaps it goes back to those days when people told me that Romans chapter 1 was about God giving up on people – God abandoning those – who exchanged their “natural” passion for an “unnatural” one - men with men and women with women.

I remember laying awake at night and thinking that God must have abandoned me and that's why I kept falling in love with my best friend.

When I finally admitted the truth about myself and was brave enough to tell my friends and family, some of them did abandon me.

So, maybe you understand something about those abandonment issues.

Now I realize that abandoning something is not always a bad thing. Abandoning failed behavior is a good thing. You know that saying: "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." Abandoning unhelpful ideas or destructive relationships is a good thing. The disciples are being invited to abandon their small boats and to seek other, wider seas.

In the story today, Peter and Andrew and James and John abandon their expectations about their lives to follow something new, something the story calls "Good News" – "*euangelion*" in Greek.

I didn't realize this but, according to the Encyclopedia Britannica, "*euangelion*" originally referred to an announcement by the Emperor.

The Emperor was the "protector and the spirit of the Empire" and it was his job to be the giver of good news.

So, here is this poor Rabbi from Nazareth roaming around the country proclaiming his good news. That was revolutionary. And that means the first thing these disciples had to do was to abandon the idea that the Emperor was the source of good news. They might have been looking for a better one – one who would make their lives less difficult; one who would announce a big tax break; one who would shake up the social structure to their advantage. But all they got from the Empire was more bad news.

Instead, they were being invited to follow the call of Jesus and to abandon themselves and what they thought they knew for some really good news that could be shared with everyone.

This is a way of talking about the "E" word. You know the word I mean? "Evangelism." Its root is this Greek word for "good news" – "*euangelion*."

The bad news is that it is dangerously close to another "E" word. "Evangelical."

And let me be clear that I grew up among a kind of "evangelical." And some of you did too. For me, there is much to be thankful for. They taught me to love God and to love other people so much that we should be willing to do the challenging thing of telling other people about God's love. They told me that God loved me and had a wonderful plan for my life. They taught me that whatever was broken in the world could be healed.

In the older meanings of the word – as some of you Lutherans know – "evangelical" was the word for those who believed in a gracious repairing of the world that no human action alone could accomplish. It was the "warm heart" of the Wesleys and their work for the poor.

But today it seems like the vocal majority of Evangelical leaders have abandoned that good news. All they seem to have is bad news. In their quest for political power they excuse the President's immoral behavior and twist the Bible to justify their excuses. If you are woman, there is bad news for you. If you are a Muslim, there's bad news for you. If you are a person of color who doesn't go along, there is bad news for you. If you are gay or lesbian or bisexual or transgendered, there's bad news for you. If you are

a person with disabilities, there's bad news for you. If you are a person living in poverty, there is only more bad news for you.

Which makes me very angry. Because it was my evangelical Sunday School teachers who made me memorize that passage in Luke 4 about Jesus stands up in his hometown synagogue and quoting Isaiah 61: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to preach good news to the poor!" The poor don't need any more bad news. Our job is give them good news.

What I see and hear today makes me wonder if we should just abandon the "E" word altogether.

But even if we do, God help us not abandon the sharing of that which is truly good news.

That's the text for today that Joanne read for us:

*Jesus traveled throughout Galilee, teaching in the synagogues, proclaiming [a revolution] the Good News of the kin-dom of heaven and healing all kinds of diseases and sicknesses among the people. His fame spread throughout Syria, and people suffering from all kinds of illnesses and painful ailments were brought to Jesus, and he healed them.*

Perhaps one of the reasons we might abandon the "E" word is that, when it comes to "evangelism," folks seem to want to sign up the well and the wealthy – the kind of folks who can prove that our church is cool and cultured and high-calibered.

But the story this morning makes it clear that the good news is for folks who are well-acquainted with the bad news. People who know their struggles and their brokenness and their need for healing.

We heard on Monday night from Dr. Brad Braxton that the Tree of Life in the New Jerusalem has "leaves for the healing of the nations." So just "reach up," we were told, and take one of those leaves and heal somebody. There's a lot of leaves. You don't have pick them all. Just pick one. And use it to heal somebody.

In other words, the best expression of the good news is action. There is a line attributed to St. Francis: "Preach the gospel [the good news] at all times. When necessary, use words." Apparently it's not an exact quote from St. Francis but you get the point.

Part of the problem with the "E" word is that it seems like it's more about talking than acting. If you want people to believe there is good news for them, be that good news. Be as much of that good news as you can be.

But sometimes it is necessary to use words. Sometimes you have to talk. Sometimes you have to explain. Sometimes there isn't anything you can do and all that is left is to just say: "I'm here; I'm here with you."

I've told you before that the scariest question I get asked on an airplane is: What do you do for a living? And the second scariest question is: What kind of minister are you? And when I say, "I hope a good one," that isn't the answer they are looking for.

I've started saying I am a "Martin Luther King" kind of Baptist. Maybe that presumes too much on my part. But it's what I aspire to. It's the kind of good news I want to be doing.

The “E” word in this story is about doing something – healing. And it’s also about proclaiming. There was a great preacher in the 30s, Harry Emerson Fosdick. He too grew up in an Evangelical church. But in his later years he imagined a different kind of church: a church that included people from different traditions; a church that welcomed people of different economic circumstances; a church that was committed to being multi-racial.

It was this church – the Riverside Church in the City of New York - where Dr. King spoke out against the war in Vietnam against the advice of his colleagues. In that sermon he said:

*This call for a world-wide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one’s tribe, race, class, and nation is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all ... When I speak of love I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response [to the world]. I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality.*

For the dedication of Riverside Church, Fosdick had written:

*God of grace and God of glory, on your people pour your power;  
crown your ancient church’s story; bring its bud to glorious flower.*

Fosdick and King believed the “ancient church’s story” was, at its best, a story about the good news of God’s love for everyone.

When I was living in bad news - when I thought I was abandoned by God - there were lots of people who did things to try to help me. I will forever be grateful for them.

But most of all, I’m glad for that person who told me that whatever Romans 1 was about, there is also Romans 8:

*I am convinced, it says, that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God.*

People did all kinds of good thing for me. But it took someone to tell me over and over again that, at the core of the universe, there is a voice that says: “I love you and I have not abandoned you.”

And today, my friends, if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts.

#### NOTES

See the note about “Insanity” at [www.quoteinvestigator.com/2017/03/23/same](http://www.quoteinvestigator.com/2017/03/23/same). Sometimes misattributed to Einstein, it appears to come out of the recovery community. For Fosdick’s story about Riverside Church, see Fosdick’s autobiography, *The Living Of These Days* (Harper & Brothers, 1956), pp.177-228. Dr. King’s speech at Riverside Church on April 4, 1967 is included in *I Have A Dream: Writings And Speeches That Changed The World*, ed. James M. Washington (HarperSanFrancisco, 1986 and 1992), p. 150.