

Acts 18: 1-11

“Ευαγγελιον”

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Rev. Heike Werder

The Congregational Church of Needham

Did you know that for the first 100 years of our church’s existence it was called the “Evangelical Congregational Church?” Who knew that?

To be more accurate, our church experienced a number of name changes. When the first church was founded in 1711, it was called the First Congregational Church of Needham. About 140 years later, this community split due to the “Unitarian Controversy” (1). The Unitarians (the liberal Christians) won the theological battle, and therefore kept the building, and the silver, and the records. They named themselves First Parish. And we are not bitter about that.

This split left a number of prominent families in the town churchless. So a group got together, among them Dr. Noyes, who wished to establish a church. The options were: a Baptist church or an Orthodox Congregational Church. The first one seemed too impractical, and the second one did not get any traction. So eventually the group settled on “the Evangelical Congregational Church.” The founding date is May 1857, and in 1859 they moved into their first church building.

I tried to find out why the group settled on “Evangelical” as part of their name. I did not find any notes of discussion on the issue. But my strong guess is that the group wanted to really set itself apart from the theology of First Parish. I think they wanted everyone to know that The Evangelical Congregational Church is a church that tried to live according to the gospel, the good news, of Jesus Christ. Evangelical made that 100% clear. They also drew up a covenant, a governance structure, and a creed to solidify their presence here in town.

For 100 years the church kept this name. In 1957 by vote at the annual meeting, the members of the church decided to drop “Evangelical.” In the archives I found the annual report and it said the Dr. Smith shared with

the church that having the name “Evangelical” might be misleading about the denominational ties. The members of the church have always thought of themselves as a historic Congregational Church, with its roots firmly planted among the Pilgrims that came to the new colony on the Mayflower. Carrying the word “Evangelical” in the church name might give the impression that the church was a member of a different denomination – that of the Evangelical Church of North America.

This discussion about the name change did not happen because they had nothing else to do. I think it happened because of the eminent formation of the United Church of Christ which happened in 1957. Lutheran, Reformed, Congregational and Christian churches of the time were invited to join this new denomination. Our church did so at the annual meeting in 1961. Ever since, our church is known to the world as the Congregational Church of Needham, United Church of Christ. There you go: a little history lesson about ourselves.

So, why am I telling you all of this? I am kind of glad that the word “Evangelical” was dropped from our church’s name – not because of what it truly means but what it has become to mean, especially in the religious landscape of the United States. I grew up in the Evangelical Church of Germany, and to us Evangelical meant “Protestant” or Lutheran, or even reformed Lutherans. The name “Evangelical” set us apart from Roman Catholicism. Evangelical theology was and is grounded in Luther’s theology – his small and large catechisms, and his other writings but then, over the centuries, has found numerous interpretations and expansions.

The Greek word “Ευαγγελιον” simply means “the good news” – the good news/the message of Jesus Christ. An evangelist is the one who brings us good news about JC. Evangelism started with Luke, Peter, James, Barnabas, Silas, Matthias, Joseph, Stephen, John, and eventually Paul, the first generation of followers to carry out the good news of Jesus Christ into the world to the Jews in Jerusalem and the diaspora, and then expanded to gentiles wherever they went. We know by now that a lot of credit goes to Paul who tirelessly shared the good news of Jesus Christ with the world.

What was the good news that Paul shared in synagogues and market places and private home with the people? That Jesus was the Messiah, the crucified Lord, and he died but rose from the dead. Resurrection was

key to his teachings. Jesus' death and resurrection was good news to Paul. A little research told me that the original disciples did not think so. Interestingly, Paul clashed numerous times with Jesus' disciples about what the actual message is. In the end Paul went off on his own. He preached a gospel of grace, that Jesus is the head of the body of Christ. He preached that faith is necessary for salvation. He also believed in the end of time, when Jesus would return to judge the living and the dead. In his letters, Paul had a lot of advice of how to live together as the body of Christ, and what is required of its members. This is just a snapshot of the message, the good news, the "euavvylion" he shared with the world. As I said I will take a closer look at his good news messages he shared with the communities he brought into being.

Fast forward to today. The practice of evangelism in our times conjures up different kinds of images and messages, right?

For me and many, the evangelism of today is associated with the more conservative branches of Christianity who use the hard-sell "turn or burn" approach to the faith. I have had a few unpleasant encounters with street corner evangelists who have told me that if I don't accept Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior there and then, I am bound for the hot place. In fact, being gay makes me a prime candidate. I know that some of you have relatives who pray for you because of your different theological beliefs, or being part of an open and affirming church with actual gay people in it, or believing that every person has the right to choose their life, and life style, and religious expression.

For fundamentalists or conservative Christians, the primary motivation for evangelism is "fire insurance." They will tell you that they have accepted Christ as Lord and Savior to escape hell; heaven will be their reward." I personally have no use for that kind of evangelism. I think it is harmful instilling a faith that is all about fear and punishment if you don't believe certain things.

Going out on a limb here, I hope I can say for and with you, that this is not our kind of theology. Just take a look at our Covenant and Statement of Welcome. Even though you might not agree with everything that is said and done, we are miles away from a theology of "turn or burn." We have, thank God, moved on from that; progressed away from this kind of theology.

But our/my negative association about evangelism should not prevent us from sharing the good news. That is why we are here.

As a church, as spirit-filled and Jesus-centered Christians we have good news to share. We have a lively, global and inclusive theology, and an affirmation of God's world in all its diversity. We have an alternative message to share – one that encourages questioning, justice-seeking, and hospitality to all of God's children.

This message is increasingly important as an antidote to the growing influence of individualism, indifference about global climate change, and polarization over the relationship of science and religion, marriage equality, and the role of government as a force for good. It is unfortunate, that our good news does not get the same public attention as the one of more conservative groups.

Our brand of evangelism is different. It has moved on from conversion for conversion's sake and "salvation" as saving people from the flames of hell, to the good news of grace, transformation, and joy in this life and in joining with God in creating structures of wholeness and justice. The lives of marginalized persons, the non-human world, vulnerable children and adults, and the planets' wellbeing at stake, should be enough reason to share God's good news.

For me the good news of our faith we can share is and needs to be an alternative to the consumerism, polarization, alienation, individualism, and fear characteristic of much popular religion and culture. Our good news is not entirely novel. In fact, I believe it's the gospel, but a gospel that excludes no one and welcomes everyone to God's banquet. Our good news it's not about "we have it and you don't," but that here's some good news that can change our and other people's lives.

What would you say is the good news of our faith if you had to go out into the world to share it? Here is what I like to share – a somewhat incomplete list:

- God loves the world, all of it.
- God rejoices in diversity in the human world as well as the non-human world.
- We are in God's hands in this life and the next.
- God wants us to have abundant life.

- God walks with us on our journey. God is close as we want God to be.
- God does not cause cancer, heart disease, or earthquakes.
- God sent us Jesus to show us how to live, to live abundantly.
- Jesus and his ministry is our guide to live the best life possible.
- Our spiritual lives can shape the health of mind, body, and spirit.
- Faith and science can be partners, whether in the quest for meaning in evolutionary theory; moral use of genetic research; or in caring for the earth.
- God is on the side of justice for the vulnerable and forgotten.
- God calls us to be partners in healing the earth.
- With God, we can experience transformation and new life.
- We can see beyond polarization to the relationship even with persons we disagree.
- There is more to life than money, power, or consumption; you can experience the beauty of relationship, nature, and everyday life.
- You don't have to die to experience salvation or experience God.
- There is no one way to be a Christian.
- Doubt and uncertainty cannot separate us from God's love.
- Faithful people can ask questions about key issues of faith.
- Christians can share and learn from persons of other faiths, new spiritual movements, and no faith tradition at all.

You know what the best good news is? We have Paul to thank for that: In life and death, we are God's beloved, and there is nothing, absolutely nothing that can separate us from the love of God. Amen.

Sources:

1. Go to: [The Unitarian Controversy and Its Puritan Roots](#)

*uudb.org/articles/unitariancontroversy.html* if you like to know more.