

## “One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish”

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Based upon Mark 1:14-20; 1 Cor. 9:16-23

In Barbara Kingsolver’s award-winning novel, The Poisonwood Bible,<sup>1</sup> a Baptist minister named Nathan Price moves his whole family to the heart of the Congo to save the souls of the people there. Believing that he was superior to the tribe’s people in every way, and was called to help them by bringing the wisdom of Western ways as well as the good news of the Gospel, Price arrives in the village of Kilanga determined to make a positive difference. But almost everything he does from that moment on is a disaster. He offends the whole village on the first day by turning the goat feast, which was offered as a gesture of hospitality at great sacrifice to the villagers, into an opportunity to condemn them for their sinful nakedness and disgusting diet. He plants a vegetable garden to teach the villagers how to take care of themselves (as if they didn’t know already), but his garden fails to produce anything because there are no pollinators in Africa for the Western plants. He alienates the whole village, insisting that everyone must be baptized regardless of whether they want to or not, and must be baptized in a river they fear because a crocodile that lives in it recently killed a young girl. The whole story reads like a lesson in what not to do if you are trying to share the Gospel. Unfortunately, although it is fiction, the book describes accurately how many Western missionaries approached their work in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. They set out for foreign countries to share *their* Western or First World understanding of life and the Gospel, often with a heavy dose of condescension mixed in, instead of sharing *God’s* grace and love in a way that the people could understand. It isn’t surprising, therefore, that the missionaries were not all well-received.

Now most Presbyterians do not need books like The Poisonwood Bible to make us feel uncomfortable about evangelism. Presbyterians tend to be spiritual introverts even if we are social extroverts. We don’t think of ourselves as evangelical disciples, especially now when the people who self-identify as “evangelicals” seem so different from us that it is hard to see how we can be following the same Jesus. Evangelism is kind of a dirty word to a lot of us. But today I want us to try to set aside our discomfort with the “e-word” and think of the concept in much bigger terms because in today’s two lessons, we can see both that there is a good kind of evangelism which connects people to God, (which is nothing like the kind Nathan Price practiced), and that mastering that good kind can teach us how to convert human conflicts into connections with the power of God’s love and grace.

When Jesus approached his first disciples, who were Galilean fishermen, mostly likely uneducated when it came to theology and philosophy, he could have said, “Hey you guys. You don’t know anything about the things that matter, so follow me and I’ll enlighten you about the kingdom.” He could have said, “You better follow me if you want to save your sorry souls from the fiery pit of hell.” But he didn’t say either of these things. Instead of using fear or condescension to motivate them, Jesus said, “Come follow me and I will make you fishers of

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<sup>1</sup> Kingsolver, Barbara, The Poisonwood Bible, (New York: HarperCollins Pub. Inc., 1998).

people.” In other words, Jesus met them where they were. They were fishermen, so he introduced the good news to them by offering them a fishing metaphor. They may not have known exactly what Jesus meant by “fishing for people,” but Andrew and Simon knew what fishing involved. They also knew from the way that Jesus framed his call that whatever Jesus was offering them, he felt that they were valuable and gifted for the job.

Paul tells us in his first letter to the Corinthians that he also found an empathetic, affirming model of evangelism worked best for him when he was trying to grow the Church. He said he became a Jew for Jews and a Gentile for Gentiles, under the law for those under the law, and weak for those who were weak, etc. “I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some,” he explains. This doesn’t mean that he was reinventing the Gospel to suit the whims and fancies of the people he encountered. If you read Paul’s letters, he spends a fair amount of time pointing out when people have confused their desires with the will of God, so he wasn’t a believer in anything goes. What Paul was trying to say is that when he spoke to people about God’s grace in Christ, he tried to translate or explain the good news in such a way that the people could actually hear it as good news. When he was speaking to Jews, he explained the Gospel in terms of God’s covenants and the prophecies. When he was speaking to Gentiles, he explained the Gospel in terms of wisdom. When he was with the weak, he spoke of God’s grace in weakness, and when he was with the strong, of how strength comes from God.

When I was a hospital chaplain, I did something similar by focusing on people’s faith backgrounds before I prayed. Chaplains, whether they work for hospitals, colleges, hospices, or branches of the military, have to serve more diverse congregations than parish pastors do. When I worked at the Cleveland Clinic, in one day I might encounter people who were Catholic, Jewish, Amish, UCC, Jehovah’s Witness, atheist, Unitarian, and more. One of the first lessons we were taught as chaplains, therefore, was to try to communicate God’s love in a way that was meaningful to the patient, not necessarily meaningful to us. It wasn’t going to be helpful to offer an atheist Communion, or to argue with a Jewish person about the messianic prophecies of Isaiah, and even among Christians, given our great diversity of perspectives on Scripture and God, it still was going to be far more healing for me to speak of God to them in ways that felt familiar, than in ways that made sense to me but were potentially offensive to them. So I always asked what faith tradition the patients identified with, and then tried to craft my prayers and conversations in such a way as to affirm the good news for them based upon the little I knew about their various faith traditions. I prayed to the Spirit with Pentecostals, and to Jehovah with the Jehovah’s witnesses. I reminded the Lutherans about saving power of God’s grace, and the Jews about God calling them by name. I never had to give up or change what I believed in order to do this, nor did I have to testify to what I personally believed. The visit was about them, and the message about the good news of God’s love for them. I simply reframed the form of the message so that the person felt respected, heard, and understood.

This may seem like an obvious thing to do, and it is. But it is equally obvious from the state of our nation that the ability to meet people where they are, instead of where we are, has become a lost skill in and outside of the Church. It’s all “my way-or-the-highway” now in our country on matters religious, political, economic – you name it. So if we don’t watch ourselves,

we can easily get caught up like everyone else in our country, in sorting red fish from blue fish and right fish from wrong fish, instead of casting a wide net of love over all. We can neglect our call to convey to all God's children the Gospel truth that they are valuable, gifted people beloved to God. In a nation of Nathan Princes not just on matters of religion, but on all matters, we can forget that it is God's way, not our way that matters most.

Now I'm not saying that we should stop fighting for justice or defending truth. Doing that is an essential part of discipleship as well as citizenship. I'm not saying that we have to change what we believe in order to please others either. I just think that if we want to promote God's way, then we need consciously to change how we communicate with one another by applying Paul's strategy for evangelism to all of our conversations, religious and otherwise. Instead of trying to persuade people how to think or feel the way that we do, which doesn't work and only alienates others, we need to try instead to understand how the people we encounter think and feel. Once we do that, even if we don't agree with them, then we can become instruments of God's grace by framing our message in a way that leaves them feeling respected, heard, and valued.

This past month, millions, including me, were shown the power of doing this by a female comedian, Sarah Silverman.<sup>2</sup> Like other celebrities, she has a strong social media presence on Twitter. When a man responded to one of her tweets with an unprovoked and awful, profane word used to demean women, Silverman had several options. She could have responded in kind with curse words, since it is clear from her act that she is comfortable using colorful language. She could have refused to engage the man and blocked him from her feed. But instead she decided to engage him with love and grace by meeting him where he was instead of defending herself. She went to his page, learned all about him, including about the fact that he had a bad back, and responded with this message (which I have slightly sanitized for our context today): "I believe in you. I read ur timeline & I see what ur doing & your rage is thinly veiled pain. But u know that. I know this feeling. PS. My back [is a mess] too. See what happens when you choose love. I see it in you." The man was so nonplused by her response that he opened up to Silverman. He told her about his pain and the ways he had been hurt in the past. She responded with affirmations and encouragement. He explained he had no health insurance to get help. She sent out a tweet to all her followers asking if someone lived in the man's area who could give him health care although he had no insurance. Instantly one of her followers volunteered. When the man said he had no friends, she said, "I see something in you. My gut tells me you could have a great life. My shrink says we don't get what we want, we get what we think we deserve. I'm telling you, you deserve so much more than you know. Welcome to the human race, Friendo. You are not alone."<sup>3</sup> The man ended up getting financial help, therapy, and a community of support because of her persistence. He now tweets his gratitude: "I was once a giving and a nice person, but too many things destroyed that and I became bitter and hateful. Then Sarah showed me the way. Don't get me wrong, I still got a long way to go, but

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<sup>2</sup> Klein, Allison, "Sarah Silverman: Attacked by sexist troll, she responded by helping him," in *stuff*, posted Jan. 10, 2018, retrieved Jan. 17, 2018 from <https://www.stuff.co.nz/entertainment/celebrities/1004464848/sarah-silverman-attacked-by-sexist-troll-she-responded-by-helping-him>

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

it's a start."<sup>4</sup>

“Sarah showed me the way.” I don’t know whether Silverman is Christian or not. But it doesn’t really matter because she did show him the way, God’s way, and showed millions who heard of her story as well. She offered a hate-filled man grace and love in a way that he could hear and receive it, and changed his life in the process. That is evangelism. It isn’t the Nathan Price-kind, the insult and scare them kind, and it isn’t the conversion, make-them-think-like-me-about-Christ kind. It is what we Presbyterians have always called need-based evangelism. You figure out what the person’s true need is, and try to meet that with grace and love as Christ always did. We do this all the time by providing food for the hungry, clothing for the naked, housing for the homeless. But we can and should be doing this conversationally and relationally too. If more Christians did in all spheres of society, even if this were the only form of evangelism we practiced, we would be so much closer to living in the kingdom of God Jesus came to proclaim than we are now.

It takes patience, persistence, and a lot of self-control at times to be able to do this. But this kind of evangelism can be learned, just like chaplaincy can. Once you learn how to discern the emotional needs of others, moreover, this form of communication is actually easier than the way most people are communicating these days because you don’t have to argue your points, or defend yourself and your views until you are blue or red in the face. You don’t have to walk around feeling offended or threatened by people’s differences either. All you have to do is to think about the desires or fears which underlie the other person’s perspective, and then strive to respond to those desires and fears with grace and love. Both gun owners and gun control advocates are motivated by wanting security. Both white people and people of color want to be respected and valued. Both conservatives and liberals are motivated by concerns about freedom and traditional values. Both Evangelicals and mainline Christians want our world to be more like the kingdom of God. If we would only spend more time talking about and connecting over our commonalities, instead of highlighting our differences, then we could see and feel that we are not really each other’s enemies. In our nation we can be united notwithstanding our differences, just as we are in the church.

Think about the Church for a minute. What made the Gospel compelling to you? Was it that you are known and loved as you are through Christ? Was it that you can trust that God will help you when you’re in need through the Spirit? Was it that you were given the guidelines you sought to live, or the assurances you needed about heaven through the Bible, or the community you need through the Church? Even though we are all gathered here together today in a Presbyterian Church, we all hear the Gospel differently because our circumstances and personalities are different. Not everyone here was raised Presbyterian, and even among those of us who were, our passions and perspectives are different, shaped by our careers, experiences, fears, and dreams. But somehow, we all were able to hear a message that God is real, loves us as we are, and can show us a better way to live and use our gifts, or we wouldn’t be here. If we can be united in our differences by God’s love and grace, so can the divisions in our nation be

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<sup>4</sup> Gizauskas, Rosie, “*Sarah Silverman responds to sexist troll by befriending him and paying for his hospital bills*,” MIRROR, Jan. 18, 2018, retrieved Jan. 17, 2018 from <https://www.mirror.co.uk/3am/celebrity-news/sarah-silverman-responds-sexist-troll-11808454>

healed by that same love and grace. Our world desperately needs to hear more good news, and God has appointed us to be the messengers. Don't let yourselves be baited into divisive fear and hate. Answer Christ's call, and build up God's kingdom by casting a wide net made of grace and love. Amen.