

Evangelism Tweaked

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar,
at the eleven o'clock service, January 15, 2012.
The Second Sunday After the Epiphany.
Based on John 1:43-51.*

Recently in a conversation about football (parenthetically, I think that is the only time I have ever used that phrase "recently in a conversation about football"), someone asked me, "Is it possible to grow up in the South without knowing about football?" The answer is no, not really. It is so much in the air and water that even the least inclined do in fact know a good deal about the basics. I am in that category. Now far removed from tailgate parties and Super Bowl gatherings, I pretend not to know anything about football largely to avoid uninteresting conversations. The only times I have watched a game in recent years have occurred when I have been with my son, who is a fan—I'm not sure how that happened—and I love watching it with him. Of course, truth be told, I would enjoy watching geriatric badminton with him, but that is about something else.

All of which is to say, I have heard about Tebow, and I expect most of you have as well, perhaps more than we wish we had. Tim Tebow is the quarterback for the Denver Broncos, who has become more famous arguably for his zeal as an evangelical Christian and for his public praying in a pose now known as "tebowing" than for his completed passes and yardage gained. As a quarterback at the University of Florida he often wrote the biblical verse reference, "John 3:16," on the eye-patch under his eyes. You know John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believed in him should not perish but have everlasting life." In last Sunday's game, Tebow completed passes for 316 yards, each pass averaging 31.6 yards, which was also the length of the winning pass. Those inclined toward such symbolism are in semiotic heaven.

You cannot make this stuff up.

The sociologist in me cannot ignore how perfectly this story depicts not only one aspect of the culture war in this country but also more specifically an internecine one raging between the ways of being Christian, two decidedly different ways of understanding theology and our practice. Let me be clear: I wouldn't know Tim Tebow if he materialized before us—unless perhaps he had John 3:16 painted on his face and was in his football outfit. But there is no reason for me to assume that he is anything other than utterly sincere, squeaky clean, and kind-hearted. I also have no reason to believe that he is stupid. On my end of the religious spectrum, secretly when we are behaving and quite vociferously when we are not, we believe that "those" who understand faith so radically different are in fact quite diminished, which is to say stupid. That is stupid of us. My guess is Mr. Tebow is plenty smart.

But that is the extent of my tolerance. This past week I heard Peggy Noonan weighing in on the subject. She asked, "How can it be wrong that a young man falls to his knees and prays?" I'd like to agree and, of course, do on some level; but the troublemaker in me wonders how we would feel if the verse cited under his eyes was from the Koran or if he "tebowed" on an Islamic prayer mat.

The bee in my bonnet, in fact, has very little to do with Tim Tebow. I am more interested in how we as Christians are *supposed* to "read, mark and inwardly digest," as our prayers instruct us, passages like John 3:16, which happens to be in the same vein and just a few verses later in John than our gospel selection for today. From this pulpit on many occasions you have heard us claim that John 3:16 is one of the most divisive verses in scripture and offer words of context about the Gospel of John and its community, trying to mitigate the dark line in the sand drawn by its narrator. Does Tim Tebow mean it to be divisive? My guess is; he means it to be a way of converting those who do not believe in Jesus. For him, we either believe in Jesus or we perish, and he certainly has the benefit of scripture on his side—certainly a non-nuanced reading of it. There seems to be very little doubt that the gospel of John claims only one way to salvation, only one right way to be faithful, only one way to avoid the results of being dead wrong on what matters most in the world. Nathanael's claim, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel," is not

unclear. Strong words. Is, then, Tebow right? Is the Jesus of the gospel of John the definitive word? Is anyone who does not believe in Jesus as the only begotten Son of God condemned?

Though even rendering a guess is dangerous, my sense is that most of us in this room do not believe that; and speaking for the only one for whom I can positively speak, I know that I do not believe it for a moment. My positive spin on the Tebow phenomenon is that it actually presents us an opportunity—and I would suggest obligation—to respond when asked in a way that is evangelical in its own right or at least in a way that shows how deeply we believe that there is another way to imagine the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Somewhere along the way we—Christians on our end of the church—adopted a historical-critical view of scripture, a view which sought to identify the great themes of truth in scripture, themes that are not dependant upon historical accuracy to be truthful, themes that exist beyond the hard lines occasionally drawn and then calcified in scripture during disputes of one community vis-à-vis another. It was and is a broad understanding of our faith. All fine and good: it makes us more peaceful people I believe. Truly I do believe that, people who have the goods to be less doctrinaire in our theology and at least potentially less overbearing—though there are no guarantees in that department.

But what does it do to our evangelism? What does it do to the Good News of our faith that I believe we are supposed to carry to the world? I think there is a hint in this complicated and unsettling passage from John, a small portion of an overall admittedly difficult gospel for pluralism of any kind. In the simple exchange between Phillip and Nathanael, when Phillip is singing the praises of this Jesus about whom he is so excited, Nathanael, obviously an early Episcopalian, snobbishly says, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" And then Philip says something quite marvelous to him, "Come and see." He didn't say, "Sit here and listen to me so that I can convince you that I am right and you are wrong." He said, "Come and see; let me show you."

Our evangelism, our imperative to tell people about how our lives and our stories have been shaped and changed by our encounter with Jesus, must be an occasion to "come and see." How the principles of Jesus' life, how our *knowing* of him through the gospels and the Eucharist—how such moments change us, make us more accepting, how they open our hearts to the whole world, how they make us hurt when we see children of God with any or no sense of God or religious practice being treated unjustly—this is the evidence of faith that evangelizes. Evangelism like that is about action, about loving more than about knowing for sure; it is about living, as boldly as we can, the practices Jesus admonished us to adopt without much regard for what someone believes or disbelieves. That is an understanding of evangelism that I can embrace. It is only successful when it changes lives for the good without regard for how or if their religious practice and belief change. People work that out one way or another. Jesus said, "Be known by how you love." To my knowledge he never said, "Be known for a tight theological argument."

Martin Luther King, whose life we are remembering this weekend, lived the kind of evangelism of which I am speaking. Though clearly coming from what I would imagine was a fairly narrowly Christian context—he memorized John 3:16 as a kid just as I did—somehow in his spiritual journey he moved beyond trying to pinpoint that too exactly to an arms-wide-open faith that said again and again, "Believe what you need to believe but act like this." This is where God is to be found and known—in loving one another, in insisting upon basic rights for all of God's children, in speaking such truth even at great expense to ourselves.

We are evangelists. We are evangelists with our lives—and not to make Christians. But to make children of God come into the fullness that God intends for every one of us.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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