

'Evangelization' doesn't have to be a dirty word

Bill Tammeus | Apr. 4, 2012 A small c catholic

Unlike some people I know, our next-door neighbors understand that a world exists beyond Kansas City, Mo., and even beyond the United States.

One way they keep in touch with the global community is by hosting high school foreign exchange students. At the moment, No. 11 is living with them -- a lovely, bright young woman from Germany.

When these neighbors recently took a trip to Europe, they asked my wife and me if Lena could live with us for a week or two. We quickly agreed.

And because we are Sunday morning regulars at the second of two worship services at [our church](#) [1], we invited her to come along with us. She gladly accepted.

In Germany, she said, she and her family attend a Protestant church, but not on a regular basis. Her family's practice in that regard sounds like the practice of a growing majority of Europeans.

That Sunday, our pastor preached another in his series called the "Gospel of Losers," in which he recounted the story of various people in the Bible who had been, for one reason or another, considered losers.

As we sat down in our pew that morning, I explained that to Lena, and her response was, "There are losers in the Bible? All I have ever heard about are heroes."

So she was quite taken with our pastor's [March 18 sermon](#) [2] about Judas Iscariot and how much the rest of us have in common with Judas.

Lena listened intently. And I think she got it. Indeed, she pretty quickly decided that she wanted to return to worship with us on Easter, if not sooner.

I tell you all this simply to remind us that as Christians, we are obligated to tell others the good news of Jesus Christ. And one obvious way for us to do that is to invite others to join us where the Gospel is preached -- even if that day, the sermon happens to be titled "The Gospel According to Judas."

Many people in mainline Protestant churches are not especially good at sharing their faith or inviting others to experience what it's like to belong to a loving congregation where souls are cared for and God is worshipped.

We have shied away from the word "evangelism" because the term seems to have been hijacked by people who think it's their job to scare the hell out of others -- literally -- and to insist that if others don't believe exactly as they do and confess Christ as lord using just the right words, they're not really Christian.

But in moving away from the word evangelism, we too often have moved away from the acts that constitute evangelism -- acts of proclaiming the in-breaking of the reign of God and, in small ways, demonstrating what that reign will look like when it comes in full flower.

And so from time to time we have to stop and re-imagine what we're doing and whether we're in harmony with the future toward which the living God would have us move. We've just done that in my congregation with a visioning task force I chaired, and now the congregation is figuring out what to do with our [150 or so recommendations](#) [3].

It's been a tiring but energizing process, and I sense that my congregation is catching the vision and is going to figure out how to remain a vibrant faith community for our time and place.

But inviting Lena to join us in worship was a reminder to me that we'll go astray if we forget to help keep Christ in front of young and old alike.

One of the things I think most struck Lena was that in a congregation of about 650 people, we know almost everyone and, thus, are surrounded by people who love us -- and whom we love. That's a Gospel that'll preach for sure.

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