

“We have truly good news!” – Rev. Jennifer Adams
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In his comic strip, “Peanuts” Charles Schultz occasionally touched on issues of faith; he covered topics like doubt, love, resurrection and belief and he did it of course, in a “we’re kids in a comic strip but have wisdoms beyond our years” Peanuts sort of way. One strip on evangelism went like this. Linus and Lucy were sitting next to each other on a bench after school when Lucy announced, quite proudly that she had “converted” someone in her class. Then Linus, with his typical blend of innocence and curiosity asked, “Oh. How did you do it?” To which Lucy replied, “I told him everything I believe and asked him if he believed it, too. Pause, move on to next box in the strip. “And then when we came to something he didn’t see my way, I just hit him over the head with my lunch box until he believed it!” Conversion complete.

Unfortunately this is only funny because it touches on some bit of truth, an experience we’ve had personally or that we know exists out there because of stories we’ve heard from others. While Lucy gives a fine example of how not to be an evangelist, truth is that there are many of us walking around with bumps on our heads because of the ways in which the “gospel” has been shared with us, or shouted at us. Either it was presented as purely about burden and fear with little room for freedom. Or the lunchbox carried with it a whole lot of guilt with an overly formulaic sort of forgiveness attached to it. Or the system that was swinging the lunchbox was a little too clear about who could eat the food inside and who couldn’t. Or the person swinging it was so full of others need for conversion that they failed to see their own. Or maybe the lunchbox was used to separate people rather than gather them – a sorting box that put people into categories that probably ranked from bad to best. Whatever the experience of how the lumps have come your way, it’s safe to say that we’ve all run into a Lucy or two, and we don’t want to be one. It’s why Episcopalians tend to run from what we jokingly refer to as the “E” word, evangelism. And it’s why Jesus words today, “I will make you fish for people,” can sound a little like fingernails on a blackboard. They make us shiver.

But the good thing about these readings is that when we hear them we do have the option of standing back a little bit as we listen; we have the opportunity to withhold our own judgments if only for a few minutes and ask very genuinely if there is a place for us in this whole scheme of invitation and even conversion. Perhaps this whole fishing for people thing really does have something to say to us. So for this Sunday, anyway, let’s step away from the lunchbox, and see if there is hope for the lump-bearing, evangelist-fearing people many of us are.

First the word evangelism does not mean “hit”, “harm” or “concur” or “that which is used to either prove superiority or beat into submission” Not even related to those things. Evangelism actually means gospel which literally translated means “good news.” And that’s what Christ’s presence and message was meant to be. Not old news. Not bad news. Not weapon. Not something that had been repeated over and over again until it wasn’t news at all. His message was supposed to be new, to come as surprise, a healing, loving surprise and there were no 1st century lunchboxes involved.

In fact, the only thing Jesus hit people over the head with was grace – and he did it over and over again. Grace in the form of stories that invited people into exploration and transformation. Grace presented as endless amounts of bread for everyone with leftovers for everyone who happened to miss that day. Grace as that which opened eyes and ears and hearts. Grace offered as welcome to the sinner and an embrace for the outcast. Grace that came as challenges, breaking open the boxes that had been said to contain God. Grace as forgiveness, healing, love, redemption and ultimately, grace as resurrection.

And so what would fishing for people look like for you if it were about hitting people over the head with these sorts of things? (Or maybe it would be a good time to drop the hitting over the head metaphor all together.) Most of us have stories of lunchbox induced lumps and running our fingers over those lumps every now and then can help remind us how not to approach this, but we shouldn't get stuck there. Because we also have experiences of grace finding us, or turning us, or cracking us open in ways that showed us more God. Grace gently but directly offered. We know of feasts meant for all, abundant loaves and forgiveness scattered wide. Grace that came as surprise. We know of the un-sorting that can happen where we are simply brothers and sisters in Christ, children of God one and all. Grace that felt like relief. We've even seen people raised up and on most days, our nets are filled to overflowing. We've seen and known the grace that inspires.

And those are stories, grace-filled stories that might actually do some good out there if we let them out of the box and reclaim the call to evangelize. Go fish for people. Do some, be some gospel out there. Step away from the lunchbox and show the world know that there is grace enough, healing enough, good news enough for all.

Amen.