



## DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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### **Soul.Harvest: The E Word**

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1 Corinthians 3:5—11

The time is urgent. The urgency hit me on September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2001, when the sign in front of Birmingham Pierce Elementary School, where my kids were, said “Bless America.” In January of that year, in Birmingham, Michigan, when the first-graders were studying Martin Luther King, it came up that he was a “minister.” And a number of kids in Miss Austin’s class asked “What’s a minister?” Hunter’s hand shot up and said “My dad’s a minister. He tells people about Jesus. He works in a church.” (Attaboy, Son!) And a number of kids asked Miss Austin, “What’s a church?” (Miss Austin retired that year after 40some years!)

#### **Historians now break Christianity down into 3 major eras:**

- **The Apostolic Age 32AD—313AD** [Christianity was illegal. The mission field was at the doorstep of those early Christians.]
- **The Age of Christendom 315AD—1950s** [The Emperor Constantine became a believer, and in those days, everybody did what the emperor did. Churches could be built. Parishes were built, with resources and those called being sent to the mission field. During this time, the mission field is at the edge of the Roman, or Western Empire].
- **The Post-modern Age 1950s—today** [With increased secularization, humanity gradually replaced God as the central object of study, and people lost the core knowledge and basics of the faith. Today, the mission field is once again right outside your front door].

While it sounds scary, it’s really not. It’s just urgent. It’s an exciting opportunity, because we’ve been here before. The church was born in a missionary situation. The church in John Wesley’s day was in a missionary situation. The church today finds itself in a missionary situation. And the only problem for us, is it means one of the scariest words in the English language is needed: The E word: “Evangelism”. In the last 120 years, as Methodists, we would say we’re good at “sowing seeds” to let others know about God, but with scandals and TV and our own fears of imposing beliefs on others, we back way off. The Methodist Church in the United States hasn’t grown, except biologically, for the last 120 years or so. The problem is when all we do is scatter seeds, we never complete the mission to see the harvest of someone entering into a new relationship and life with Christ. We might be good at helping people, but we stop short of naming our first love and foundation of our faith, which is not “faith in general,” but faith centered in Jesus. And Jesus *desires* to be my foundation! So over the next 3 weeks, we’re going to be looking at God’s understanding of sharing faith. [INTRODUCE “Sharing the Good News” BOOKLET, available at Dexter UMC.]

1 Corinthians 3:5 *“What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. 6 I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. 7 So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. 8 The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. 9 For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building. 10 By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. 11 For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.”*

We share faith because of who Jesus is: the Son of God, the messiah, God made flesh, our salvation. And we share faith because I believe the deepest problems we face are at the core, spiritual problems. Is the answer more legislation, tougher laws, more police, more lawyers or judges? Perhaps, but the real solution must address the condition of the human heart. It must break hearts of stone, transform hate into love, and offer healing and deliverance to those who are slaves to ideas, or their pasts, or their addictions. Why do we share faith in Jesus? Because without him we will always be lost and our lives will never realize our God-given potential. Jesus opens the door to a whole new world for us. He enriches every life he touches, one person at a time, as his kingdom expands across the globe.

Why do we care? Why do we share this good news? Because Jesus Himself gave us this mission! Jesus' words are recorded in all 4 Gospels about his life, and in the book of Acts: that our lives are not just to include sharing his message, but our lives are to be guided by it. Let's look:

- Matthew 28:19 *"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."* When we are about the business of making disciples, Jesus is with us always. What a promise!
- Mark 16: 15 *"Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation."* Not just salvation for humanity, but for the whole, fallen creation.
- Luke 24:47 *"repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things."* Witnesses simply tell what they know.
- John 21:15 *"Feed my lambs."* John 21:16 *"Take care of my sheep."* John 21:17 *"Feed my sheep."* Three times Jesus tells Simon Peter to continue Jesus' work of being a shepherd of people.
- Acts 1:8 *"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."* Jesus calls us to begin at home, and reach out from there.

Here is the dream that keeps me awake and motivates me: **What if each of us became a self-reproducing Christ follower?** What if each of us reached out to a friend, someone we already know? Did you know that 50% of all the people you invite to church will say *yes*? Let's prove it. How many of you are here because of an evangelism crusade? How many are here because a friend or relative invited you? And it's usually the invitation of a friend that helps us grow in our faith as well, though often it's unspoken. I wonder if your friend could put into words what they thought?

### [PLAY MEDIA CLIP—The Unspoken Plea ]

**The message is not of judgment!** Jesus said he was here to proclaim good news! That's all that the word *Ev-angel* means: *Eu=good, angel=message*. **And what is the good news?** *"The Good News shows how God makes people right with himself—that it begins and ends with faith!"* Romans 1:17 *"That God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people's sins against them. This is the wonderful message he has given us to tell others."* 2 Cor. 5:19.

**Okay. If 50% of people at any given time are ready, then what's the problem?** If it's not them, and it's not the message itself, *it must be me*. What keeps *me* from fulfilling my mission? Is it embarrassment? Is it inconvenience? Is it fear? Is it my frenetic schedule, or laziness? Is it that I really don't care? I don't like those people? They don't belong here? I know it's not easy. What is it? And the simplistic Christian rhetoric just turns me off. Hearing it can be like fingernails on a chalkboard. But...I'm noticing the fact that I've used my dislike of clichéd, easy faith and my desire for authentic faith as a cover for spiritual passivity. If I believe everything is so hard, so complex, so confusing all the time, or if I'm addicted to angst and uncertainty, then I excuse myself from the responsibility of trusting what I *do* know and from obeying God wherever and whenever God has spoken clearly. Many of God's truths are mysterious, but many are plain: Trust. Love. Give. Hope. Serve. Go. What happens after that isn't to be our concern. Remember Paul's words: *"It's God who makes things grow."* We can only make ourselves available. The easiest thing in the world to be is a critic. Any idiot can criticize anything, whether in the name of deep thinking or not. (I know. Jesus died for critics too!) But what takes real spirit and sense of adventure (and obedience) is to give your life to a cause that will outlast you, and change the world for good. What would it take to change the world?

And change MY world? A ton. But starting may *not* be as big as you think...

Malcolm Gladwell writes how, in the 1980s, New York City was in the grip of one of the worst crime epidemics in history. But then, without warning, something happened. Murders dropped by 2/3rds. Felonies were cut in half. There were 75% less felonies on the subways in 2000 than there were in 1990. What happened?

Did they double the police force? Did the government step in? Did it coincide with the decline of the drug trade? Or the economy? Among all possible factors is one called The Broken Windows theory. It says this: Crime is the inevitable result of disorder. If a window is broken and left unrepaired, people walking by will conclude that no one cares and no one is in charge. And it spreads from there. Relatively minor problems like graffiti, disorder, and panhandling invite more serious crimes. And that's just what New York City did. They put this theory into practice, and rebuilt the subway system...with no graffiti and no turnstile hopping.

But Malcolm Gladwell in his book *The Tipping Point* points out that small changes in the environment can make big differences. There *are* things you can change: you can fix broken windows and clean up graffiti and change signals that invite crime in the first place. Rather than major changes like putting extra locks on your door to slow the criminal down, or longer sentences so they have less opportunity to do harm, or moving to the suburbs to put distance between you and the criminal, simple changes can make a huge difference in the world! Could we create the kind of environment that would let people know "someone cares," and "someone really is in charge"?

I experienced this right here. On my second visit to Dexter, before we ever moved, I was driving in town, and two people at two different stop signs gave me the little over-the-steering wheel wave. I was like "Wow!" And from that point on, I thought I was in the friendliest town in America! From 2 little waves, I felt great about this town!

**You thought the word was going to be "E-vangelism."...But the word could be Epidemic.** We are in desperate need of a new Epidemic. Our world is in deperate need of a new E-pidemic. In a way, Christianity is a bit like an epidemic. Although you can't "catch" it, it's sure contagious. And you may be the only "carrier" your friend or neighbor has. Imagine if even 50% of us became self-reproducing Christ followers? What a difference it would make in our church! What a difference it would make in our lives, as we created an environment where people came to experience forgiveness and healing in Christ? An epidemic of health and growth in their relationships. Jesus' ministry would continue, until the whole world knew the powerful, awesome, life-changing love of God! What a harvest!