

**“Evangelism I to Eye”**

October 1, 2017

A Sermon by the Rev. John C. R. Silbert at Trinity Presbyterian Church; Butler, Pennsylvania  
The Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A) and World Communion Sunday

Text: “. . . *Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*”

*(Philippians 2:12b-13, NRSV)*



Image Credit: Banner by Gloiela Yau Dulak, fabric artist; from an oil painting by Dorothea B. Kennedy;  
As featured at the website of the Shadyside Presbyterian Church.

Let us pray: Our Father and our God make us masters of ourselves that we may become the servants of others. Take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; take our hearts and set them on fire, for we would see Jesus this morning, in his name and for his sake, we pray, Amen.

The routine of his life had settled in on him. Quietly, predictably, with a small measure of comfort and without much flash or fanfare . . . a steady sort of rhythm without variation . . . a farmer’s life.

But then one day, among the rows of corn – head high and silky – he heard the voice: *“If you build it, he will come . . . If you build it, he will come.”*

It was this quiet call – heard as much in his heart as in his ears – which propelled Ray Kinsella, the protagonist in the movie, *"Field of Dreams"* into action; a parable of an adventure in faithfulness and call; the search of a young man for an answer to the riddle ringing in his ears.

Ray is led to do strange things: he plows under his crops to build a baseball park --- diamond, bases, outfield and bleachers bounded by silky rows of corn. Strangely enough, as he does so, baseball players magically appear – "Shoeless Joe" Jackson and members of the Chicago White Sox of the long ago 1920's – as real as if were the summer of 1922 and the team was thick in the pennant race. . . Ray and his wife and daughter, however, are the only ones at first who can see them . . . The rest of his neighbors and friends and town cannot see anything . . . Still, with an evangelist's zeal, Ray holds onto the visions which daily appear from among the corn rows at the edges of his well-tended outfield to play ball. Despite ridicule, threats of bank foreclosure, and the disbelief of family, neighbors and friends, Ray Kinsella pursues the voice's call, living by faith, knowing that there is a larger purpose at work in his *"field of dreams."*

As I watched this movie unfold, I was impressed by the mission-like zeal of the man who followed his heart of hearts. Seeing with eyes of faith, this man stepped out from his complacency and routine and entered on an unknown path because he had to work out that thing within him that pushed him further down the road. The action was not without consequence or pain, but still, there was a voice saying, *"If you build it, he will come,"* and the burning desire to find the "he" that would come . . . and the people scoffed at him and his *field of dreams* . . . but the one who finally did come to Ray was his own long lost father in love.

We're not comfortable with the burning zeal of someone else's passion; we don't understand it, if we don't own the same vision. Are you not a little on the defensive when the zealot comes to call? It's alright to tout the wonders of a new brand of shampoo, or the handling of the new family car, or the taste of a new brand of coffee, but then again, we own those experiences, have tried them for

ourselves; and their newness to us is a special kind of wonder we're willing to share with others . . . As a matter of fact, we Presbyterians, we Christians, can get downright evangelistic about stuff like that:

*"Say, Gwendolyn, how are you doing?"*

*"Just fine, Sam. I'm out doing a little shopping. But I am having a hard time deciding what kind of air freshener to buy. . ."*

*"Yes indeed, Gwendolyn that can be a difficult decision. You don't like to be disappointed by something like that (Sam seems moved). . . Can I share something with you? Jane and I had the same problem – we needed an air freshener, too – but what fragrance? We tried all types: 'Great Outdoors,' 'Woodland Promise,' 'Spring Air,' 'Floral Gardens'. . . but we finally settled on 'Nature's Own' – a deep scent of natural aromas that, frankly, proved to be just as they advertised on cable . . . It's made right here in Pennsylvania! Boy, were we thankful! I'm sure if you give it a try, you'll agree, it's the answer to your problems!"*

We know how to do evangelism with the things we know and trust. And we're willing to share in the zeal of others – if their vision and ours line up . . .

Moses was an evangelist of sorts. He had a vision for the world he knew, and he had a call to go with it. So with great zeal and fervor, he struck out upon an unknown road to follow a voice that spoke to his heart that said in effect, *"I will lead you, if you follow."* Turning his back on a sure thing – after all he was considered a "son of Pharaoh" – he led his real kinfolk out into the wild . . . as odd as plowing under a bumper crop of corn to build a ball field! The people scoffed: *"would that we were back in Egypt, where we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill! Even if we were slaves there, why were we brought out here to face hunger and thirst?!"* *Is the Lord among us or not?!*

The people of Israel, lacking eyes of faith to see the vision laid out before them by God, did not have the same zeal as Moses . . . Out of touch with his experience of faith, they did not know enough to

try and live on the faith they had been given for their own . . . and what they chose to see – what they privileged in their hearts – was a slavish past from which they had already been freed!

Somehow, the miraculous fact of their existence beyond Egypt was of no account to their hearts predisposed to Egypt. That God had brought them out of Egypt with a strong hand; that they had witnessed the dashing of Pharaoh's chariots in the sea under the outstretched arm of Moses; that they had been given bread that settled like frost in the morning and had secured meat in the netted quails of evening did not register with any kind of zeal . . . *"Is the Lord among us or not?"* they questioned. Faithlessness at the edges of their parched lips formed the words of disbelief in their hearts.

The people were thirsty.

We are what we eat.

And God was angry. . . Was not the whole of their experience a living testimony to God's presence? Is the Lord among us or not? *"YES!"* we can hear Moses cry, *"HE IS! Your whole complaining, contentious, and cantankerous life is filled with the presence of God, if you would lift your heads up from your navels long enough to really see!"*

What do you see, anyway, that you can't see him?

Why is it we Christians . . . we Presbyterians find it so hard to talk about God out there – and perhaps more shamefully, in here, in church? What is it about the vision of God's action in our lives, or in the lives of others that leave us tongue-tied about him when we meet our troubled friend? Or frustrating neighbor? Or questioning child? Or wondering sister? Or grief-filled parent? Or down-and-out stranger?

We're good at talking up movies we've seen with others, or netflix we've rented, or automotive gas treatments we've tried, but we stumble into awkward silence over Christ!

*"Well, I've always believed religion's a private matter, you know?"*

Is that it?

Is that the reason for the silence?

But what do we offer the hurting family member who asks us for some measure of hope from us -- nothing? After all, religion is a private thing, between yourself and God, right?. . . *Sorry sister, I have no hope to give you . . . No mom, I can't bear your burdens with my faith . . . I'm afraid it's just too personal.* What you we say to the young child – afraid of the big, dark things in the world – who asks if God is someone nice, or real, or worthy of trust – nothing? What do you say to the crass, unthinking, uncaring belligerent who offends you and our beliefs – nothing?

*"Listen pastor, you do the 'holy stuff' – that's your job! You know what to say and how do say it."*

Do I?

Do you know what I find shocking? Parents who believe they ought not to get involved in what their children believe; that they ought not to contextualize faith for their children . . . Did I tell you about the woman who came to talk to me years ago when I served a church in Westmoreland County. She was a beautiful and attractive woman of her thirties who, out of the blue, walked into the church and asked to see the minister; she was not a member – she had come in off the street.

She began by saying she wanted to make arrangements with a local funeral parlor about her final disposition and wanted to ask me a few questions for clarification . . . ! I will admit to be put-off by this . . . *"Is there something I should know about your current condition,"* I asked tentatively. *"No, nothing actually, but I just want to be sure about what I believe about the end and about faith and all."* She then started asking questions about life and death, and especially about who Jesus is and what she believed . . . Like she was looking for reassurance in it all. And I helped her as best as I could, not knowing anything about her or her background. I then asked her about what she learned growing up in her family and she said this: *"Well, my father and mother were very clear about not wanting to influence*

*me on any beliefs. They left me to find my own way . . . It has been hard, I will admit; even harder now that they are both gone."*

And I could weep for her quiet consternation, now a young adult making her own way in the world . . . What were her parents thinking! Can you believe it?

Let me tell you something. If you are a parent you better take responsibility for showing your children the faith that you profess. Kids need direction, not a free-hand; we fail them utterly if we do not take an active and particular interest in what they believe and how they come to believe it! There is a whole generation of kids who are daily becoming lost in digital worlds of their own making because the ones who truly love them are not providing any kind of context in their real lives for what is good and worthy and true; I think they mean well, but don't think they can compete with the entertainers out there who meet them screen-by-screen-by-screen.

Third Presbyterian Church, Uniontown, PA, passed out Bibles to their confirmands. They were each signed by the pastor. Because my Dad, the Real Rev. Silbert was my pastor, he put an extra message in mine:

*It read: "God said it; Jesus did it; I believe it; that settles it."*

That may sound harsh to some of you – it was light shining on my path through the wide world.

That was enough for me until I began taking over how and where I walked on my own journey; and began wrestling with my own working out of salvation . . . But I was grateful for the light he showed me as I walked on down that path. . .

You are as responsible for your life in Christ as I am . . . And you know your personal story of your life in him better than I do. The 'holy stuff' is yours too . . . And if you ever want to get anywhere down the road Christ is calling to you from, you'd better start getting used to doing the 'holy stuff' on your own. Begin to claim again that vision of Jesus Christ and his love you once saw – whether it was in the way your mother or father used to say grace at meals, or the look that old Sunday school teacher

gave you when you asked a good question, or the feeling you once had when someone said, "Jesus loves you," and you believed it then. . . That's it! That's the vision of the kingdom that leads to plowing under cornfields to build something you believe in and can tell others about; your own life and how Christ is working in it.

"Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" – because it's hard work, and nerve-racking and thankless sometimes – and because there is a voice inside of you calling, "If you do this, I will be with you . . . If you do this, I will be with you . . ." For God is already at work in you to will and to work for his good pleasure.

If we are ever to do evangelism – which is a fancy word that means "telling the Good news with zeal," as God intends for each of us, we must look beyond ourselves and begin to see with the eyes of faith, Jesus Christ in the face of others around us. And seeing him there – serving us in unusual ways – we must try sharing ourselves with others too.

After all, that's why we're here.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.