

“Risking Life and Limb”

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

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I saw an evangelist once whom I will never forget. He was incredibly effective. He went about his task with joy and courage and stamina and no small amount of strength. He showed me what it means to spread the good news about Jesus Christ. I watched him in awe.

How did he do it? Well, I can tell you how he didn't do it. He wasn't passing out tracts. He didn't have a microphone in front of his mouth. He wasn't quoting the Bible or even using the name of Jesus. But boy did he spread the gospel!

You see, he was in a park with some friends, enjoying the sunshine of early spring. Looking down when his foot ran across something that wasn't grass, he spied a ragged ball of twine, obviously weather worn. And so he picked it up, and turned it over and as he did so, a two foot length of this twine escaped the rest of its tangle. The end was frayed as if it had snapped, rather than being cut by a sharp knife. He thought it odd to find twine underfoot until he remembered...

Then, squinting into the sun, the evangelist looked into the heavens. He wasn't sure he would find what he was looking for, but he looked nonetheless until his eyes found their prize. Unbeknownst to his friends, he slipped off to the trees.

The Apostle Paul gives his protégé his farewell charge: “Timothy, preach the word! Do the work of an evangelist.” I've often wondered just what it is that an

evangelist does. How often do you see an ad in the classifieds for an evangelist? How many headhunting companies get calls for evangelists? Do evangelists get tenure? Do they have unions? Do they get dental benefits?

There isn't really a job description for evangelism, is there? Sure, you describe evangelism as proclaiming the love of Christ. Or as converting people to Christianity, or as saving souls from the fiery pits of Hell, or even as church growth. But trying to pin down the duties of an evangelist is like trying to define beauty. You just can't do it because there are just too many ways to tell the good news about Jesus Christ and assigning particular tasks to the evangelist would only limit the evangelistic mission and imagination.

Be that as it may, Paul tells us something about what it is to be and evangelist. Paul must have been something of a Boy Scout for he tells Timothy to be prepared. Paul must have been an admirer of Job for he cautions Timothy to be patient. And Paul must have been a straight-A student who knew the value of education for he admonishes Timothy to be a careful instructor. Keep your head, Timothy, and endure hardship. In all his directions to Timothy, Paul is forming an evangelist, not writing a job description.

But back to our evangelist in the park. After a while, the evangelist's friends noticed he was missing and began to look for him but he was nowhere to be found. Not in the grass, nor at the soccer field, nor the drinking fountain, nor the parking lot. But then they noticed a small cloud of witnesses surrounding a tree on the top

of the hill. And in the tree, climbing higher and higher among the branches was their friend and they ran over to watch him. By the time they arrived, he was so high upon the tree that they could barely make out that it was he, and they wondered what had gotten into him so that he would wander off and go climb a tree. But then they looked ever so carefully, I looked ever so carefully, and we could see the object of his climb.

Paul the prognosticator to his young charge Timothy said this: “For the time will come when men (and presumably women too) will not put up with sound doctrine...They will turn their ears from the truth and turn aside to myths.” This is a great truth, from Adam’s time until our own, that God’s people, despite their best intentions have, are, and always will turn from the truth of God, from the love that is offered to them by the God of grace, from the assurance of citizenship in the Kingdom of heaven, from the comfort of Christ’s embrace. You see, for the whole of human existence, we have been lost in the pleasures of plenty, jaded by cynicism, wounded at the hands of abusers, fearful of the day of death. We have turned every way but towards God. We have drifted in the winds of outrageous fortune, we have become ensnared in places almost unreachable. Almost, but for the work of an evangelist.

The cheap, plastic kite emblazoned with the red choo-choo train was almost within the grasp of the evangelist. Just a few more feet closer was all he needed to move. The crowd below cheered him on as he inched higher and higher on

branches that were getting slimmer and slimmer. Finally he reached it and took hold of it with his free hand and extricated it from the just budding branches. The crowd roared their approval and waited for him to descend with his prize, but it would not be so simple, for he was in something of a fix! He couldn't climb down and hold onto the kite at the same time for he would surely fall to his death. And so, carefully choosing an appropriate path for the kite, he let it loose for its journey earthward. But alas, just then the wind came up and blew the kite directly into the branches on the other side of the "Y" of the trunk he was on.

Well, the evangelist was pretty far up there in the tree and coming down would be no easy task. He had shorts on and his legs were already scratched and cut. He was a large man too and his weight made many a branch bend precariously. His feet slipped often from their perches and more than once the crowd was sure the end was near. But the evangelist was determined and when he had made it back down the fork of the tree, he charted yet another route up the other side where he eventually claimed again the kite and was able to drop it to the ground without incident as the crowd once again roared their approval. And then he descended once more to the earth.

Once on the ground though, his work was unfinished, for he took the ball of twine from his pocket and gently tied the end once more to the kite and strode purposefully down the hill. On just the second try, he had that cheap, plastic kite with the red choo-choo train as high up in the air as all the rest in the park that day,

as high as the expensive box kites, as high as the kites with long, elaborate tails, as high even as those two-handed high performance aerial acrobatic kites. In fact, it flew so well that it didn't seem to want to come down as dusk approached over the top of the hill.

And just what does a cheap, plastic kite with a red choo-choo train have to do with evangelism? At the risk of overdrawing this magnificent metaphor, it may be helpful for us to look at the kites and the evangelists around us. The evangelist of our story was not an ordained pastor or a missionary. He was simply a good 'ol fashioned believer. He didn't know how that kite found its way into the branches and frankly, it wouldn't have mattered anyway. But he saw it up there, twisting in the wind, stranded, useless, alone, and helpless. If it sounds like I am ascribing a lot of human attributes to this kite, then you are listening carefully, for that kite could be a Kate, or a Roger or a Tyrone or a Maria. It could be a mother or a brother, a cousin or a friend. It could be a co-worker, or a boss, or the maintenance worker who sweeps your floors. It could be a panhandler or an investment banker or a factory worker. It could be a man, a woman, a child. It could be anyone, it could be you.

Our evangelist noticed what the kite left behind — a ball of twine with a ragged end. And instead of throwing that weather-beaten twine back to the ground, as had its original owner, he realized that something had gone awry. How many strings do we come across every day that let us know that someone is adrift? A

pointedly callous word? a look of dejection, an affair, an overgrown front yard, a child with but one parent, all around us are signs that people are hurting and cast adrift, needing to be found, needing attention and love.

Once our evangelist located that kite in the branches, he proceeded to do the very thing that Paul charged Timothy: do the work of an evangelist! Up the tree he went to free the captive and give sight to the blind, and make the lame walk, or in this case fly. And up the tree he went to share the love of Christ with a person trapped by sin and sorrow. The trees we must climb to do the work of an evangelist are not easy ones. We may be ridiculed or rejected or refused. We may be afraid of the heights of vulnerability we must climb to reach people, or we may be unsure of our footing when we reach out to grasp them. We may even have to go out on a limb a second time to free someone. We may come down from the tree battered and bruised and bloody and still without the object of our climb. But still we must climb, we must do the work of an evangelist.

You see, without climbing and reaching and risking, attaching the string is impossible. We will never get to see the flight of reconciliation, the soaring of the grounded, the pulling against the bonds of earth of the person who wants to be nearer and nearer to heaven. We will not see the useless become useful, the lonely fly with others, or the lost finding new direction.

As I reflect on the story of our evangelist, I wonder how many of us bother to look down as we go through our days, and then, finding some remnant, some

clue, some distress call, look up and search for its source? How many of us would have bothered with some weather-beaten twine. How many would bother with a cheap plastic kite with a red choo-choo train? Or climb not once but twice and risk life and limb?

Paul's charge is written to Timothy but our ears should be burning because he is talking to us too, talking about our encounters with kites and people and about the church's encounter with culture and politics. We must take to heart and practice this charge for it is the basis of the ministry of he whom we follow, Christ Jesus. Christ had the eyes to see and the ears to hear the cries of those who suffered, the least, the last, and the lost. He looked down to find the remnant, he looked up into the branches of the world and saw the ensnared, and had compassion. Christ climbed the hill to the tree and went up in its branches pulling prostitutes and tax collectors and adulterous women and Samaritans and all manner of sinners from captivity. He retied their strings of faith, their bonds to God, so that they might soar higher and higher. That is all they needed. Someone like Jesus, someone like us, to care enough to look down, look up, climb a tree and reconnect them with God. As we are Christ's heart, hands, and voice, may we meet the challenge of risking life and limb for those whom Christ calls us to seek. Amen.