

God's Word Always Works

Isaiah 55:6-11 (NIV)

⁶ Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near. ⁷ Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon. ⁸ "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. ⁹ "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. ¹⁰ As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, ¹¹ so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

"You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood... that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness and into his wonderful light." (1 Peter 2:9) "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, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." (Matthew 28:19-20a) God made you. God saved you. God brought you to believe in him and all that he has done for you, calling you out of darkness and into his wonderful light - how he has taken away your sins, how he has lived perfectly for you. Now, he calls you to share that wonderful news with others so that they too can live in that wonderful light. This is one of the reasons that we are here on this earth and have been not taken up to heaven yet. So, who are these people that we are going to declare God's praises to? Who are these disciples that we are going to make by baptizing and teaching them? We call these people that we share God with "prospects."

So, what kind of prospects are we looking for? Is it that neighbor that you met who told you that they grew up Lutheran but haven't gone to church in a long time? Is it that random person who rings your doorbell and they tell you that they want to share their faith with you? Is it that friend who tells you that they are tormented in their conscience day and night because they have learned about the God of the Bible and see nothing but an angry, wrathful, vengeful God who can't wait to punish him for anything and everything that he has done wrong? Is it the person who absolutely abhors all people who call themselves Christians, who says that the only good Christian is a dead Christian? Is it a stranger you have never met, don't even know where they live, but they have never heard about Jesus? Which one of these would make the best prospect, the one most likely to become a member of our church?

There's something to overcome with all these people, isn't there? With the complete stranger: how do you even reach that person? With the Christian hater: maybe this is one that we shouldn't even go near just because we don't want to unnecessarily risk our lives. The God of wrath person could really use some of that sweet relief that comes from hearing that Jesus has done everything for us, taken away our sins, and made a place for us in heaven. But then again, they seem pretty angry at God. What can I possibly say to make him believe that God is not a God who only judges and only pours wrath out on the sinner? The door to door missionary: I mean, they are on fire for their own religion, right? What could I say that would get them to leave their religion? The fallen away Lutheran: they've already have heard the truth. They know this stuff that we believe. Maybe they could easily integrate right back into church if someone invited them. Then again, what has been keeping them away? Have they honestly never done a Google search for "Lutheran Church near me"? If they came, would they even keep coming? What would change them?

It's easy to prejudge people with our ideas of what makes a good prospect, but have I then already decided who will become a Christian and who will not? Thinking of our Gospel reading about the sower and the seeds, have we already decided what kind of soil these people are? Am I so arrogant as to say when the Holy Spirit will work saving faith in someone's heart and when he won't?

At the beginning of Isaiah chapter 55, the LORD extends an invitation: "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare. Give ear and come to me; listen, that you may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David." (Isaiah 55:1-3) God provides everything we need for our body and life without cost to us. He does not keep a tab of all the things he has given you in terms of food, drink, house, home, family, friends, clothes, etc. as if to stick you with the bill at the end of your life. No, he freely gives you these things. But this everlasting covenant is one of free pardon of all the things we have done wrong, all our darkness of sin. It is the life Jesus lived perfectly for us, substituted in our place. This is what the LORD which satisfies us spiritually in a way that no one else and nothing else in the world does. This satisfies us not just today, but forever, as we stand holy before God because of all he did for us.

What does this mean for each of our prospects? For the fallen away Lutheran it means that God still remembers him, that even though he has walked away from God, God has never walked away from him. Instead, he has always remained accessible to him, looking for him, reaching out to him and maybe that happens through you. For the door to door missionary, all other religions basically tell you that there is something that you have to do in order to have a better life – either right now or in the hereafter. Constant work, constant progress, always knowing that you are never done – this is not satisfying. With Christ, everything is done. It's all satisfied. This truth can be found no where else other than by what God offers us. You can share with them that unique rest from Christ. For the God of wrath person, they are longing for peace, something to put their conscience to rest and dispel their anger. With Christ, they can see that God himself took upon his shoulders the wrath that our sins deserved. Instead of seeing nothing but a judge waiting to crush him, he will see a God who loves him so much that he was crushed so that we would be healed, that we would have peace, that we would have all our burdensome sins taken away. The Christian hater can have his heart melted learning that even while hating him, Christ would still willingly laid down his life for him, expecting nothing in return. If we seek out the complete stranger who doesn't know God, then they can hear for the first time of a God who completely satisfies our deepest need – a Savior to rescue us from this life of sin and death.

Which one is the best prospect? All of them. Because the LORD satisfies all of them. He is making himself near to them right now through his Word. "Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near." (verse 6) Their time to know God is now. Every time we share our God who satisfies, his Word always works. "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." (verses 10-11) We may not think some of these people will become Christians, but It doesn't matter which one we think will make the best prospect because God's Word always works. We may not think it will work, that there are too many things in the way, but the LORD says, "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." (verse 9)

God's Word always works. With each of those prospects, there is a story that ends with them knowing and believing in God, being freely pardoned of their sins by his mercy, being completely satisfied in all their spiritual needs. In fact, you may have been one of those prospect profiles. The fallen away Lutheran, the one who had been raised knowing God then walked away for a while, how many of you listening today are that person? Door to door missionaries have been brought to Christ through people like you opening their doors and sharing Christ with them, even though they came to you to share something else. A recent example is a former missionary named Micah Wilder. The God of wrath person, that was Martin Luther. The Christian hater, that was the apostle Paul. The complete stranger: those are the people we never knew before but God brought them into our lives and we shared him with them. They are strangers no more. Each of these prospects has come to know the spiritual satisfaction that only God provides: freely pardoned by his mercy. They have joined us as part of the Holy Christian Church, united in our faith in God and what he has done for us. God's Word worked on us. God's Word worked on them.

Because God's Word always works, we take a lesson from the sower and the seeds. We scatter those seeds generously, not with a picky attitude, prejudging those who will believe and those who won't. We just throw them out there to all the soil because only God knows when and where his Word will work, but he promises that his Word always works and never will return empty but will accomplish the purpose for which he sent it. We do what Paul and Apollos did. We plant that Gospel message, of what Christ has done for us living perfectly for us, keeping all of God's commands for us, and sacrificing his life to take away our sins, that we are freely pardoned by the LORD's mercy. Then we trust God to make it work, make it grow.

Who's the best prospect of the five people described? All of them. We don't need to evaluate how likely they are to come to faith. We trust that God will use us, who we are, our talents, our gifts, to sow his Gospel message. And then we trust that his Word will never return empty but accomplish the purpose for which he sent it. It will work on anyone and everyone because his ways and thoughts are higher than ours. Sow his Word generously. Let God take care of changing that heart, whoever the person is. Trust that his Word will never return empty; it will always work. Amen.