

Once upon a time there was a lost adventurer who ended up on the doorstep of a missionary. The missionary finds him and nurses him back to health. Feeling better the man asks the missionary for directions to the nearest town. On his way out the backdoor he sees a horse. He goes back into the house and asks the missionary, "Could I borrow your horse and give it back when I reach the town?" The missionary says, "Sure but there is a special thing about this horse. You have to say 'Thank God' to make it go and 'Amen' to make it stop." Not paying much attention, the man says, "Sure, ok." So he gets on the horse and says, "Thank God" and the horse starts walking. Then he says, "Thank God, thank God," and the horse starts trotting. Feeling really brave, the man says, "Thank God, thank God, thank God, thank God, thank God" and the horse takes off at unbelievable speed. The adventurer is impressed with his steed but he sees a steep cliff coming up and suddenly he needs to do everything he can to make the horse stop. "Whoa, stop, hold on!!!!" Finally he remembers, "Amen!!!" The horse stops a hoof-width from the cliff. The man leans back in the saddle and says, "Thank God".

The apostle Paul also seemed to appreciate the need for using the right word in the right context. He wanted to make the gospel accessible to people living in different cultures; therefore, Paul would distinguish between the Word of God and the Jewish culture in which he first heard the gospel of Jesus. Some early believers thought that only Jews who followed Jesus should receive the gospel. Paul argued that Jesus' message was for the whole of humankind. To that end he would adapt the presentation of the gospel to suit the culture of his audience. Converts would not have to become Jews before becoming followers of Jesus. This missionary strategy was disturbing to people who thought that Paul lacked Christian principles.

The Christian faith became allied with the colonization movement from Europe to Africa and the Americas. Evangelism as conversion applied not only to Christians converting people of rival religious beliefs, but even as one type of Christian missionary seeking to convert Christians from another branch of the Christian family. Some of our Native reserves reflect that kind of division that was imported by white missionaries. The aversion of some Native people to the Church dates from this movement, even if there were other beneficial effects along the way. Historically, institutional Christianity tends to be a missionary religion that has conquered, with or without force, in order to convert. Islam also has a missionary history. In contrast Jesus started a movement of disciples that was not an institutional church, but a network of people who had a mission to serve God. Baptism into the kingdom of God was their initiation and service was their way of proclaiming the Good News. In our gospel lesson from Mark we hear the story of Jesus showing his caring by healing multitudes of the sick. He leaves the synagogue and comes into the house of Simon and Andrew, accompanied by

friends James and John. Unfortunately when they get to the house, Simon's mother-in-law is lying there sick. Jesus heals her fever; she then "ministers" to them by serving a meal. There is a fine reciprocity here: Jesus heals her so that she can serve others. She too is expected to care enough to serve. This is evangelism Jesus-style.

Jesus' approach emphasizes announcing the kingdom through parables and teaching, and through healing people. There is no attempt to convert people from their existing belief in God but rather to show how the power of God can transform life more radically than people can imagine. The cost of caring does not seem to matter to Jesus, even if it alienates religious leaders. He heals anyway. Street people, addicts, criminals ... deserve healing just as much as privileged people. Here we remember that we are all on the same boat—and that we have a place together in the great circle of humanity. Some of you know the nautical language in *The Boater's Manual*. There are burdened boats and there are privileged boats. Privileged boats have motors—they must yield to those who depend on wind. At God's table the privileged and the burdened get out of each other's way; then we sit down together.

The United Church sits down together in partnership with many Christian churches around the world. It has been a number of decades since we have sent out missionaries to convert people in other lands, according to our notion in Canada. Some of those efforts were not respectful of people's culture. An aggressive missionary movement sometimes alienated spiritually aware people from Christianity. Residential schools were part of that mindset. Perhaps that kind of Christendom missionising put us off having a mission at all. But if we cease to engage other people in the Christian story, we ourselves wither and die. Once we relied on our schools and our culture to tell the Christian story. In Christendom, Christianity is the official religion of society. But Christendom in the Western world is over and we have yet to adjust to the reality that we have to paddle our own canoe, or sink.

Our greatest challenge is to relate the Christian story in our own community, rather than in communities in far away lands. Sometimes it is easier to give money for obvious mission work far away; it is more challenging to become personally involved in mission in our own back yard. Some of our mission is to tell the Christian story in such a way that our own children, friends and neighbours would like to be a part of the Christian story. When God transforms our living and we embody a faith that is life giving, we are fulfilling our mission to spread the Good News. Like Simon's mother-in-law we are healed and we serve others as ones touched by Jesus. Telling our story does not require that we devalue other people's story. Our story is tied up with Jesus' story and the story of God's love for all Creation. Let us believe and be glad. Amen.