I have a theory about picking sermon topics and that theory is if one of the readings in the lectionary makes me uncomfortable, it is a sign that I should preach on it. So, today that means we are going to talk about evangelism. The main reason evangelism makes me uncomfortable is because I am not very good at it and the only solace I receive in my evangelistic shortcomings comes from the fact that no one else seems very good at it either. The church’s attendance numbers in the United States and in most of the western world bear this out. I mean the trends in the Episcopal Church’s attendance make it look like there has been a plague. But finding solace in this misfortune is not a good thing and is kind of like finding solace at a Star Trek Convention. Yes, you will find a lot of other people who really like Star Trek but you will be in a crowd of people who really like Star Trek. So why are we so bad at evangelism and is there something that can be done about it? I am not sure, but we do have something from St. Paul today that might help so let’s take a look.

Paul says that he went about evangelizing in this way: “To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.” Paul, in recording how he went about evangelizing describes an almost chameleon like ability to be like those to whom he was preaching the Gospel. He does not say how exactly he did it, but it does sound a little like inculturation.

If you are not familiar with the term inculturation it is, “the adaptation of Christian teachings and practices to cultures.” Put another way every culture comes with its own framework and way of understanding things. Meaning that for someone to convey the message of Christianity they have to work within the confines of that particular culture. This building is actually a very mild example of inculturation. The architect Richard John Upjohn, who designed St. John Chrysostom, wanted to give this parish the feel of a Gothic church. The only problem was, at the time, Wisconsin was still on the frontier. So rather than designing a building requiring stone and flying buttresses he created something that could be constructed from the red oaks found on the banks of Lake Okauchee. Of course, that is innocent enough and for the most part non-controversial, but the question is how far can we go with adapting Christianity to an existing culture? When I was in Kuwait the Catholic Priest, I served with, was from Ghana. He told me that in Ghana it was very common, even among Christians, for men to have multiple wives. It was part of the culture before Christianity arrived and it sounds like the Church kind of changed to accommodate this practice, but is that okay? When you use a culture to help in explaining Christianity how much can you take on? Can you say Jesus had 12 disciples just like you have 12 wives and both are great? Where is the line between using the culture as an aid to explain the Gospel message and changing the Gospel message to adapt to the culture? In the last sentence of today’s reading Paul says, “I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.” I think that is the key. Paul was such a successful evangelist because he always remembered what is the most important thing. The Gospel message was non-negotiable and everything else was the handmaiden of that message.

And that seems a rather easy bit of advice – always keep the Gospel central in whatever we do. But as Von Moltke reminds us, our plans and priorities evaporate when they are put it into practice. Culture is constantly changing meaning there is always a need to adapt the Gospel message to the whims of the age. But unfortunately, in adapting the message the Church has often forgotten that the Gospel is unchanging. And because the Gospel is unchanging it cannot be bent to fit with whatever is groovy at the time. For example, a number of years ago the Church of England had an advertising campaign where they took an image of Jesus and made him look like that famous image of Che Guevara -- the one where he looks like a hirsute Breck girl in a beret. And if that wasn’t insipid enough, underneath the picture they put the slogan “Meek mild, as if.” The whole ad campaign has aged about as well as the Frito Bandito. I assume the thinking was that the young kids seem to dig that Che Guevara so why don’t we say that Jesus was just like Che Guevara. That should pack the pews. It of course didn’t work because if the young kids want to admire a murdering thug like Che, well they could just admire Che. The church continually embarrasses itself by trying to say that Jesus wants whatever the culture wants. If you want a church that is really into the environment there is a church for you. If you are of a different political persuasion and want a church that is more into the 2nd amendment, you can find that too. But the Gospel is not subservient to culture, it is instead above culture. We can have whatever beliefs we like but must always remember to seek first the kingdom of God.

When I was in High School my hometown of Fresno had a sister city exchange program with the town of Münster in Germany. The idea was to give American students some exposure to German culture and a chance to improve their ability in the language. One of the guys who went with us decided to change this model and rather than improve his German he became adept at speaking English with German syntax and a weird German accent. Meaning that when all was said and done, he did not improve his German and regressed in his ability to speak his native tongue. That is kind of what much of modern-day evangelism looks like. We ignore anything good in another culture and degrade the Christian message. Certainly, the Church can engage with the culture, but it must never forget why it exists. And to get a little serious for a moment we see what happens when the Church forgets the Gospel message and instead offers the same salvation that that our society offers – salvation found in creation and not the creator. We become a church which says all things necessary can be found in the zeitgeist; that the solutions to life’s problems can be found in the same things that made those problems. But that is madness and just adds to the hopelessness of our world. It is a message that can only come from a people who have forgotten the primacy of the Gospel.

We know that there is nothing within us that can save us and so must look to God. A pandering church that looks just like our prevailing culture is of no use. It is just more noise in a noisy world. Yes, we should love people and respect them and do our best to know where they are coming from. But if we want to evangelize it is about taking someone from point A to point B. Point A with some Christian window dressing is not what Jesus meant when he said to go and make disciples of all nations. For it is only in living the Gospel that we may bring others to the faith and be God’s own this day and forevermore.