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## **Go Ye into All the World and Preach the Gospel ... presumably more than once every eight years**

**By The Rev. Sam Sheridan**

It used to be that if you'd drive south on U.S. Route 29 into my hometown of Charlottesville, a few miles from town there was a billboard with a split advertisement.

On the left side was everything you could ever want to know about the nearby Which Wich restaurant – pictures of beautiful sandwiches, prices, a website, even detailed directions. That ad had everything you could want to know – and too much information to take in all at once. On the right side of the billboard was completely white space with only two words – “Five Guys.”

This is the advertising strategy the church needs! The Which Wich people wanted to make sure you had everything. The Five Guys people decided – “Let’s just remind them there IS a Five Guys somewhere around here. That is enough.”

One of my most well-worn soapboxes to climb up on is just how bad Episcopalians are at evangelism. There are practical, cultural, and theological reasons for it, but we **are** really bad at evangelism.

When I worked in the Diocese of Southwestern Virginia, my Bishop used to say that an Episcopalian brings a friend with them to church at a rate of once every eight years. That's not a great record. When Jesus tells the Apostles that He's going to make them fish for people, it's reasonable to believe He meant more than one fish every eight years.

Why don't we do a better job of evangelizing? One reason is that we have all these signs around the country that say the "Episcopal Church Welcomes You." We think we're welcoming; we say we're welcoming; and we (hopefully) feel welcome in our own church. It stands to reason that everyone will realize how welcoming we are and come by to check us out. That's like putting a bucket next to the ocean and deciding that's good enough to catch some fish.

Another reason we don't evangelize very well is that most Episcopalians report, when it's studied, that we would really like our church to stay pretty close to how it is right now. We don't want to invite too many new people because then there would be a bunch of new people.

It's like we took the sometimes-misattributed-to-scripture adage, "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach him how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime," and decided, "You know, we already have enough fish ourselves, and we really like our fishing spot, so maybe they'll figure it out on their own somewhere else and we really don't have to worry about it."

I don't have a good fishing metaphor for my third reason why we don't do enough evangelizing. But we've got Which Wich.

We act like if we're going to tell someone about Jesus, it's got to be the whole advertisement all at once. We've got to know the history, have the best things to say, demonstrate proofs, and have answers for whatever they may ask. We have to be able to give people everything they could possibly need to know to have a relationship with God. We think we need the whole Which Wich billboard.

And we don't. We need to be Five Guys billboards for Jesus.

Sure, some people are called to teach, explain, write, and proselytize, and have all the answers to any questions that might be asked.

But, to do a better job evangelizing, to tell people that God is love, or the Holy Spirit guides this world, or that Jesus Christ is Lord absolutely **does not** require anything that extravagant.

If God's love is important to you, the people in your life should know. You don't have to convince them of anything. You don't need to convert them to anything. You don't even need to make them understand what you mean by "love."

For an Episcopalian, evangelism isn't about winning an argument or keeping score. Evangelism is about the people around you knowing that you've got some *good news*, and if they want to know more about it, they can come and see.

There's a hunger in the world – for goodness, righteousness, peace, and love. And a hunger inside each of us, and all of us together, for those things which Jesus promises.

Jesus says, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." (Matthew 4:19) and it's really not about fish. It's really about how we answer that deep hunger, how we feed people, and encourage them to feed even more people.

Evangelism is about how we love people, and then encourage them to love even more people. Five Guys has the strategy the church needs. We **can** just remind them there is a Jesus around here somewhere. That **is** enough.