

The Power of Witness
 Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, WV
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John 20:19-31

19When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 20After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." 22When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

24But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

26A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 27Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." 28Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" 29Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

30Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 31But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Acts 2:14a, 22-32

2:14a But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say.

2:22-32 "You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know-- this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power. For David says concerning him, 'I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken; therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; moreover my flesh will live in hope. For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One experience corruption. You have made known to me the ways of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence.' "Fellow Israelites, I may say to you confidently of our ancestor David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne. Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying, 'He was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh experience corruption.' This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. (NRSV)

“The church of God has to be the salt and light of the world. We are the hope of the hopeless, through the power of God. We must transfigure a situation of hate and suspicion, of brokenness and separation, of fear and bitterness. We have no option. We are servants of the God who reigns and cares. He wants us to be the alternative society; where there is harshness and insensitivity, we must be compassionate and caring; where people are statistics, we must show the count as being of immense value to God; where there is grasping and selfishness, we must be a sharing community now.

In the early Church, people were attracted to it not so much by the preaching, but by the fact that they saw Christians as a community, living a new life as if what God had done was important, and had made a difference. They saw a community of those who, whether poor or rich, male or female, free or slave, young or old—all quite unbelievably loved and cared for each other. It was the lifestyle of the Christians that was witnessing.

We witness too, by being a community of reconciliation, a forgiving community of the forgiven.... But how can we say we offer the remedy to the world’s hatreds and divisions, if we are ourselves as Christians divided..., if we are unforgiving, if we don’t greet or speak to certain people? People will be right to say, ‘Physician heal thyself!’ We must not only speak about forgiveness and reconciliation— we must act on these principles.”¹

These are words from Desmond Tutu, written in reflection on his time fighting apartheid and the destruction left in its wake.

It is an idea that we Presbyterians cherish. An idea expressed in a quote attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, “Preach the gospel at all times -- If necessary, use words.”

Or, said even another way in the words often given to me as counsel by a parishioner many years ago, “you have no business talking about your faith until someone asks you why you live the way that you do.”

This idea, these quotes, all have a good and strong Biblical basis. There’s Matthew’s version of the judgment, where the basis of judgment is the compassion believers showed in their actions.

Or consider the words of James. That faith without works is dead.

As I said, these are words that we Presbyterians cherish. For many reasons. Certainly top among them is that we understand that our faith leads us to action. Feeding the hungry. Building good, affordable homes. Welcoming the refugees. Establishing a budget in which the amount designated for outreach reflects a commitment to helping others, here and around the world.

¹ Desmond Tutu, *Crying in the Wilderness*, ed. John Webster. Mowbray, 1990, pp. 6 – 7.

In The Westminster Collection of Christian Meditations, compiled by Hannah Ward and Jennifer Wild. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1998. pp. 315-316.

But there's another reason we like this emphasis on actions, isn't there? We like actions because they allow us to de-emphasize the thing that makes us uncomfortable. Talking about our faith. And dare I even utter the words, evangelism?

Our scripture reading for today is a reminder that living the life of faith means acting on our faith includes articulating that faith. We're supposed to walk the walk, we're also supposed to talk the talk.

And I won't speak for you, but speaking for myself, that makes me squirm just a little. It's hard to talk about faith. Faith is so personal. Tough to put into words. And I have a deep and abiding respect for people of differing beliefs. How do you talk about faith without putting down what someone else may believe?

And we may laugh about being God's frozen chosen, but I suspect that there is more than a little part of most of us that likes that label because it lets us off of the hook from becoming vulnerable by being willing to talk about our faith. When vulnerable is exactly what God calls us to be.

Or as someone else I know has suggested, Presbyterians are far too attached to being respectable. In fact it has even been suggested that Presbyterians suffer from terminal respectability that keeps us from answering this call to talk about what it is we believe.²

And the call is there. Consider Acts, for example, fully 1/3 of Acts is made up of the early apostles talking about their faith. Preaching. Sharing what they know about the power of the Good News. It's what is happening in our passage for today. Peter is preaching. It's his response to the people who have heard the apostles speaking in all of the languages and think not that they are Holy Spirit inspired but are drunk.

Yes. They early believers were inspired by the lives and actions of the early community, but it also took hearing the words, the stories. Because witness is powerful.

As another preacher I know tells the Easter story, "the Easter angel... From his cemetery bench he had seen and heard it all. And he told it to the women, and they shared the news with the other disciples, and the disciples told others, and the word spread. Eventually someone told you. Someone told me. And now it's our story to tell."³

So. What does it mean? What does it mean to be an evangelist? How do we know what to say and when to say it?

Theologian Shirley Guthrie:

"Christian witness does include telling the story of our own faith journey and how we have experienced the presence and work of God in our own lives, but the goal of authentic

² I can't find the original source of "terminal respectability." I'd love to be able to credit it....

evangelism is not to talk about our personal religious experience, but to talk about the God we have experienced.... The story we Christians have to tell is not only about how God has been present and at work in our individual lives; it is to set our little stories in the context of the story of all of God's people...."⁴

Brian McLaren offers this interpretation:

"Good evangelists... are people who engage others in good conversation about important and profound topics such as faith, values, hope, meaning, purpose, goodness, beauty, truth, life after death, life before death, and God. They do this, not because they like to be experts and impose their views on others, but because they feel they are, in fact, sent by God to do so. They live with a sense of mission that their God-given calling in life is not just to live selfishly, or even just to live well, but to live unselfishly and well and to help others live unselfishly and well too. Evangelists are people with a mission from God and a passion to love and serve their neighbors. They want to change the world.

Good evangelism is the process of being friendly without discriminating and influencing all of one's friends toward better living, through good deeds and good conversations. For a Christian like myself, evangelism means engaging in these conversations in the spirit and example of Jesus Christ."⁵

In other words, faithful evangelism isn't bullying, it isn't knocking on, much less knocking down doors.

What it is, is being ready to walk in when the door is opened.

Listening, paying attention, caring for others, and when moments to arrive, being ready to receive them. To be able to articulate what it is that you believe.

Or from 1st Peter. "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you;"

For the hope that is in you. For the hope. With this, as in all things, the call from God is not just to talk about anything, it is to articulate Good News. As Peter preached so many years ago, to tell people about the profound wonder of the resurrection, the joy found in the presence of God, and in knowing yourself to be a beloved child of God.

Faith-sharing isn't about visible piety, but intentional listening and the careful choosing of words, words that can comfort and help, illumine and encourage.

⁴ "Evangelism in a Pluralistic Society- A Reformed Perspective" Shirley Guthrie at the Covenant Network Conference, 2002, <http://www.covenantnetwork.org/sermon&papers/guthrie.html>.

⁵ Brian McLaren, *More Ready Than You Realize*, p. 16.

And practice. Lots and lots of practice. Talking about our faith- why it means so much- how it changes us- what we believe- doesn't come naturally to most of us.

When the cellist Yo-Yo Ma made an appearance on the television show "The West Wing" he played himself, performing for the fictional Bartlett White House, playing Bach's Cello Suite No.1. When filming a musical performance for television it's normal to record one take of the music and then have the musician play to that track, in order to have it all match when the show is edited together. Yo-Yo Ma didn't do that. So precise was he in his performance of that piece that he assured the directors that each take would be the same. And they were, the director later reported. All forty-five takes. How is Yo-Yo Ma so good? He claims he's not that gifted, but that he practices. Hours and hours a day. He's been playing the cello for some 57 years, and he still practices, hours and hours a day.

"I actually enjoy practicing more and more . . . as a child, I practiced because I had to practice and you didn't want to mess up. But that's not a good thing. You want to please your teacher, you want to please your parents, you want to please your peers. And now I practice because I've experienced so much love that you practice out of loving a phrase, loving motivic change, loving a structure or harmony change or the way a sound can get to something.

I think that part of practicing is great because it unites what you want to do in engineering, as in technically, where do you put your arms and your fingers and your body—micro movements—with that desire and the feeling of what it needs to be. That's a wonderful process because it's a constant of going toward something bigger than the notes and yourself, and very lovingly so."⁶

How do we get good at sharing things that are so personal, sharing them well, sharing them faithfully, sharing them in a way that brings glory to God? We practice. We practice.

Does good evangelism mean that we have to abandon our respectability? No. But in order to keep it from being terminal, we should let the Holy Spirit help us loosen our grip just a little.

And then... maybe just a little bit more.

To the Glory of God.

Amen.

⁶ <http://stringsmagazine.com/yo-yo-ma-on-intonation-practice-and-the-role-of-music-in-our-lives/>