

The Word-Centered Life – The Evangelical Tradition

Acts 1:6-8, II Corinthians 5:17-20

Before we look at our next topic in our sermon series, I just wanted to say a few words about this past week's election. Obviously there were persons who celebrated the outcome and there were those who were deeply disappointed. I think this past election clearly revealed some of the deep divisions that exist among people in our nation. Some of those divisions also impact us and may be reflected in our own opinions and views on a number of topics. But our call as followers of Jesus Christ is to work together for the sake of the kingdom of God. It goes back to what we talked about last week, that our personal holiness must be complemented by our social holiness. That in spite of our differences, we are called go work for justice and peace. We are called to be a welcoming, caring community of faith and look for ways to share God's love with others. We are challenged to maintain the unity of the spirit so that the world might see that love in us. And we are called to pray for our leaders, to pray for our president, to pray for our president-elect, to pray for all who carry the responsibility of civic office, that they may lead with wisdom and work for the good of our nation. But let's not forget our calling: We who are the church of Jesus Christ must be the example to others around us by the way we share God's love and we let the light of Christ shine in us.

Now on to our sermon series. And it is all about Good News. When you have good news to share, you don't want to keep it to yourself. I was thinking about the World series just a week and half ago. If you were a Cubs fan you were ecstatic about sharing the news of their victory. After 108 years of waiting, those signs which stated "it's gonna happen" became "it finally happened!" By the way, I loved the posting Max Fisher sent me concerning any desperate prayers of Cub fans. (show picture). A World Series victory was good news for any Cub fan and millions turned out to celebrate the long-awaited triumph. Today's focus is also about sharing some good news. We continue our series on the Devotional Classics and we look at another stream of Christian teaching that is referred to as the Word-Centered Life. It is the understanding of the Christian life that comes out of what is called The Evangelical tradition. The word "evangelical" has fallen on hard times for some people because it became a

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word associated with either a particular social point of view or a particular political agenda. People think of evangelicals as persons who are narrow in their viewpoint or very conservative in their theology. But being evangelical is a very important concept for the follower of Jesus Christ because the word really has to do with the good news of the Gospel. The word “evangelical” comes from the Greek word “euangelion” which means Gospel and the word “gospel” means “good news”. So the teachings and insights from the evangelical tradition are all about telling the story of Jesus, sharing the good news about God’s love and grace. It is about being a witness for Jesus Christ.

You remember last week we talked about the two key components of our faith. Witness and service. And as part of the social justice tradition we are called to serve others. We said that service is seeing Jesus in others. That as I reach out to someone in need, I might see that person as a child of God. And if service is seeing Jesus in other people, then witness is people seeing Jesus in us. That we would live in such a way that the love of Jesus would be seen in us and that this good news about Jesus would be evident in what we say and do.

So let’s go back to today’s Scripture reading from the book of Acts. What a wonderful thing it must have been for those early followers of Jesus to once again be sitting with Jesus and talking about the kingdom of God. Their hopes had been crushed on the day of his crucifixion, but now here they were with their risen Lord! Their faith had been restored and they were once again facing the future with great joy and expectation. And it leads them to ask this question: “Now, Lord, will you restore the kingdom of Israel.” Was this going to be the time for the Messiah to reign on earth? And Jesus’ reply was: “it is not for you to know the times or the periods that the Father has set by his own authority.” But it was the time to receive this glorious promise: Acts 1:8 “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit come on you.” And it was also the time to hear God’s plan and call for his followers: “And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” These words parallel Jesus’ words we call the Great Commission...the call to make disciples, the call make the message known. And you shall be my witnesses. God could have chosen some other way to communicate the message of good news, but God chose you

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and me. This then becomes our mission, our message, our responsibility, our calling to share the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The evangelical tradition reminds us that this is our imperative. To share the faith. It is every Christian's task. I know we are not all evangelists. Certainly there are some persons who have this special gift of evangelism, to communicate persuasively and evangelistically the gospel message, but all of us as followers of Jesus Christ are witnesses. All of us are messengers. It became the passion and motivation for a man by the name of Paul who lived to bring the message of God's salvation and grace. And he implores us as we hear his powerful statement to the Corinthian church. The apostle Paul describes it this way. "We have this ministry of reconciliation. We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us." An ambassador is someone who is a representative for someone, or for a company, or even for a country. For the believer in Jesus, we are called to represent Christ to the world. We are Christ's ambassadors, God making his appeal through you and me. Wow! What a privilege and what an important task given to Christ's followers.

One of the devotional classic writers in this week's reading is E. Stanley Jones well known for his ministry as a missionary in India and his evangelistic missions in the United States. In his excerpts from his writing called Conversation, he talks about the importance of the persons who have been converted to Christ to share what they have come to experience. He put it like this: "...pass on to others what you have found. If you don't share it, you won't have it. He quotes Paul in II Corinthians where he says God supplies seed to the sower. Jones comments: If you don't sow it, you will have nothing to sow...Unless you are evangelistic, you don't remain evangelical." Being a witness for Christ is to allow others to hear and know the witness of God's love in you. All of us with a story of faith to tell if we profess our faith in Jesus as our Lord and Savior. That's how I like to think of it...just telling our story.

Thank you Judi, for being an example of telling your faith story this morning. Because each of us have experienced faith in Christ in our own unique ways. Each of us has a different story to tell. How God has touched our lives, how we

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have experienced God's love and grace, how our lives have been changed when we turned to Jesus. For some of you it may have been quite a dramatic conversion, where God completely changed your life, and you felt the power of a life that has been transformed. For others, it was a much more gradual change, but you have come to the realization that your faith is real and it makes a difference in your life. But it is your story. And your story may speak to someone that another person's story does not. That's why everyone's witness is important. You may be able to reach someone with the good news that I cannot.

Telling the story. Sharing what your faith means to you. When God gets a hold of your life, it is a message that should not be kept secret. Let me briefly mention 2 examples of people in the Bible who became witnesses of the good news. They are both from the gospel of John which should be no surprise for this Gospel is often referred to as the Gospel of John, the Evangelist. John even stated that is his purpose in writing: "But 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."

The first is the Samaritan woman in John chapter 4. When she encountered Jesus she discovered someone who could reach her at her deepest need. And in that encounter she became a changed person. Here is her testimony: "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done. Can he be the Messiah? The Scripture goes on to say: "Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, he told me everything I have ever done. Her enthusiasm in sharing her good news led others to believe.

The second is Jesus healing of the man born blind in John 9. The Pharisees called the man who had been born blind and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know this man (talking about Jesus) is a sinner." Now listen to his testimony: "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." It is the powerful words we sing in "Amazing Grace" "I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see."

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This is our calling and challenge. To share the good news through our witness. We have the opportunity to bring the joy and hope and peace we have found in Christ by telling our story. We can become the means for others to discover God's good news. People who are searching for meaning, people who are troubled and feel lost, we have the message of God's grace, God's forgiveness, God's salvation, God's gift of eternal life. I believe that a helpful way to think about sharing the faith is by thinking of it as making the Word come alive from our personal experience. Letting the Word of God dwell in you. It allows people see how the Lord has made a difference in your life. To share the faith, to tell your story is to make the Word authentic. I guess that's why this tradition is called the Word-Centered Life. Because you help others to see the message of the Bible in you. Yes, we still have our flaws, our faults, and failures, but we allow others to see how God is at work in your lives through our brokenness and through our flaws. When you tell your faith story, you are helping to make the Word real for others, making the Word of God genuine in your life.

I know it's not always easy to share your faith. Sometimes we allow the culture and attitudes of the world around us intimidate us when it come to letting others see and hear our witness. Charles Spurgeon, famous preacher of the 1800's is one of the writers in our Devotional Classics. He describes our common condition. He said: "...let us take a look at the conversation of many professing Christians. Pay attention to the conversation of the average professing Christian. You might spend from the first of January to the end of December and never hear them speak about their faith. They will scarcely even mention the name of Jesus Christ at all." And then he says: "On Sunday afternoon what will they talk about at the dinner table? It will not be about the minister's sermon, unless they want to point our some faults." Well, I know that never happens here! He concludes this thought with this prayer: "O Lord, revive your work in my soul, that my conversation may be more Christ-like, seasoned with salt and kept by the Holy Spirit."

I guess the challenge for us is to have a holy boldness in sharing our faith, in telling our story. One thing that impressed me when reading the book of Acts was that spirit of holy boldness by the followers of Jesus in the early church.

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You see them as people with deep convictions about their faith. When Peter and John were facing persecution and resistance because of their message they did not allow the fear of losing their lives keep them from proclaiming the gospel. And when they were told not to share the faith, they responded with these words: "We must obey God, rather than men." Most of us don't walk about with fear of death because of our faith, like many Christians do in other countries, but many of us are hesitant to tell the story for other reasons. Maybe the fear of rejection, being ridiculed for our faith, or maybe we don't want to appear pushy about our beliefs. And yet if our faith is important to us, we do have a story to tell. Not to manipulate or try to push someone into faith, but simply to let the light of Christ be seen in your life. Letting others have the opportunity to see the good news of Jesus in you. Letting others see Jesus in you.

A man by the name of Palmer Ofoulku became a very noted and distinguished preacher in Nigeria. Palmer tells his faith story of how he became a Christian. He said that although his family was not Christian, they had placed him in a mission boarding school so that he could obtain a good education. He attended that school for many years but he remained a follower of the traditional religion in which he grew up. Of course while being in the school, he met many missionaries over the years. Some of them, he said, seemed to express an air of superiority in their manner and an arrogance in their Christianity. Palmer said I was not impressed at all with their witness. But one year a new missionary came to the school and became very involved in the lives of the Nigerians. This missionary brought a new quality of relationship and eventually that missionary brought Palmer Ofoulku to faith in Jesus Christ. Palmer later described his testimony like this: "That man built a bridge of friendship to me, and Jesus walked across." Isn't that our call as witnesses of the Gospel. Building bridges to that Jesus can walk across. Making the Word real for people by the way we speak and the way we live. You have the privilege and mission to tell your story with your words and with your life. Words of C.S.Lewis: "Don't shine so others can see you. Shine so that through you others can see Him." It truly is letting people see Jesus in you.