

Good morning church!

When I say God is, you say good. God is...

When I say All the, you say time. All the time...

God is

All the

All the

God is...

Amen, amen, amen! My friends we come to worship, and we hear and believe and profess with our lips that God is GOOD, that God has made a difference in our lives, that our lives have been blessed by the love of God. And yet...around the water cooler on Monday morning we are quick to share the highlights of the weekends sporting events, the happenings of our kids, and every detail of our weekend but generally we do not mention what we were doing between the hours of 9 and 10 and the good news that we not only heard but we felt and that we know in our core because of our faith. And this is why I think the flow of blessing others is getting jammed up in our world today. We come and are moved and growing deeper but then we are not sharing that blessing with others.

Which is why over the last five weeks we have been talking about how we have been blessed not for our own gain but to then go into the world and be a blessing unto others. When we started the series Pastor Gina powerfully reminded us of some of the painful realities that are happening within a mile radius. Over the

next two weeks I invited us to be mindful of the 7 out of 10 houses that have no faith family, no place to worship, nowhere to be blessed and grounded by the good news of Jesus Christ. And, that our work in blessing others begins with prayer. Pastor Gina then invited us to bless others by listening deeply to one another without judgment. Last week she reminded us of the saints in eternity who served Christ on earth and how we are called to do the same and serve one another in love. Now friends, I know we are reluctant to share our faith, especially in a world where politics and religion can end or divide a conversation faster than one can imagine. But, my siblings in Christ, we have an important story to tell and stories matter because they transform lives.

I'd like to show you the impact that a story can have with a 1-minute video. **PLAY**

**VIDEO**

What emotions did you feel in this 60 second clip?

And did that story motivate you in any way?

Now listen, if a 1-minute video that is a Swedish commercial can do all of that, how much more powerful is God's story, our story? How much more powerful is the story that says God created us and called us very good. The story that reminds us that even in the darkest valley, God is there. How much more powerful is the story that says God has planned a future for us and it is a future

filled with hope. The story that teaches us over and over again that the worst thing is never the last thing. How much more powerful is the story that says God so loved the world that he would send his only son so that those who believe in him shall not perish but have everlasting life? My friends, because of God's story, the story of our faith, we are the ones who have had our lunchbox filled by God's grace and love. We are the ones who have been empty and had the community of faith fill our box. We are the ones who have seen the needs of the community not just here locally but through our global missions and then give a part of our abundance to fill the boxes of others. If there has been a time when you were empty, and God filled your cup would you give me an Amen? If there has been a time when you have been hurting and the church lifted you up in prayer and support would you say Amen? If there has been a time when you have been filled with doubt and the church gave you a safe space to ask questions and grow in your faith can I have an Amen? If God has been there with you in your worst, lowest, emptiest, most painful times and seen you through can we go beyond the Amens and say Alleluia?

We have a powerful story to tell of who God is and what God has done in our lives and in our world. And it is time for us to share the story we have because when we don't share it we are shortchanging others a blessing.

Now, I am not asking everyone to get a bullhorn and stand on the corner pronouncing that there is hell and damnation for anyone who does not accept Jesus. In fact, I am begging you not to do that! I am not asking you to go two by two and knock-on doors with pamphlets to interrupt people in their homes at dinner time. In fact, I am begging you not to do that either!

So then pastor-how do we share our story? I am so glad you asked. Pastor Gina, take it away! No, I am just kidding. To be honest, for most of my life and ministry I have struggled with evangelism because I have seen tremendous harm done in Jesus' name. But, as I have grown in my own faith and as I have practiced ministry, I have come to see faith sharing as something much simpler. Here is the secret-ready? Keep being friendly and loving with the people who are already in your life but don't be afraid to be fully authentic about who you are and what your faith means to you.

Most of the people I encounter every day are people of faith but more often than not that is not true of my high school friends or family. To protect anonymity let's just say that my friend Nicole and I have known each other for a very long time but she has never been a church goer. In fact, she labels herself as an atheist. But I dearly love Nicole and we have decades of memories and laughter between us. We have always respected each other's belief systems and while we have talked a

little about our perspectives we have never gone into great detail. Recently Nicole's husband of over a decade asked for a divorce. Now Nicole and I were friends when I went through my divorce so she immediately reached out to me. In the midst of some really deep pain I could just take her calls and let her cry and talk. Early on I said I know you don't believe but would it be ok with you if I just raised you up in prayer on Sunday? She said yes that would be great. A few days later I was encouraging her to find a song that spoke to her and I told her the story of how my song was "I have this hope" by Tenth Avenue North. And how on the date my divorce was finalized in court, I got into my car and turned on the radio and the first song that played was nothing other than "I have this hope". Even though it is a Christian song she is now listening to it daily. I have shared with her that the church I serve offers Divorce Care to the community and maybe she could find a church that has this program. Now, I wish I could say she came to Jesus and everything is wrapped up in a neat little bow but I can't. This just happened in the last couple of weeks and while she thanked me profusely, I have no idea how seeds of faith may or may not be planted but I tried to share my faith in a non-judgmental, non-forceful, loving way. And the rest I have to surrender to God.

In our Scripture passage today, Nicodemus comes to Jesus late at night. I always think that is an interesting detail, late at night. It is almost like we can assume that Nicodemus was lying in bed wrestling with these deep questions and out of frustration for not being able to sleep, or maybe he was embarrassed to be seen with Jesus in broad daylight. But he finally gets out of bed and goes to Jesus with his questions. When he comes to Jesus with his restless questions, Jesus simply tells him who he is and what he needs to do to become a Christ follower in a confident but loving way. Nicodemus, you have to be born from above and find a new life through the Spirit. This is who I am, this is how I can change your life, this is what my love looks like. And through relationship and loving sharing, Nicodemus comes to believe in Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. He came empty and full of questions and doubt and perhaps even shame in the middle of the night. And there as Jesus shares his story, his lunchbox is filled and his life is forever transformed and changed. That is the power of our faith story.

Now church, let me be very clear-this church fills lunchboxes all the time.

Someone is hurting? Let's show them love with a prayer quilt. Someone is alone for Thanksgiving? Let's bring them a Thanksgiving meal. Someone is hungry? Let's stock the food pantry shelves in abundance. The list, my beloved ones, goes on and on and on of how we have had our lunchboxes filled by God's grace and the

beloved community and how we have in turn filled the lunchboxes of others. But now I would encourage you to bless others by telling these stories, your stories. Tell the good that is being done in Jesus' name. Tell the good that Jesus has done in your life. God's story matters, your story matters, and other people's stories could be forever shaped and changed because of your willingness to share your story.

I'd like to ask you to prayerfully listen as I read a Scripture from Romans 10:14.

"But how can they call on Jesus to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in Jesus if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about Jesus unless someone tells them?"

And now this time I would ask that this time you swap out the word "someone" for your own name. And how can they hear about Jesus unless Jessica, Gina, John, Linda, Steve, Pattie, how can they hear about Jesus unless you and I tells them?"

Jesus' story is our story, our story has been shaped by Jesus, and because our lunchboxes are full of God's great love, we now need to go out into the world and bless others by sharing the story of Love with those who are empty. So, friends, go forth because this is our story, this is our song, so let us praise Jesus all the day long. Amen and amen!