

“Show and Tell”

2 Corinthians 4:1-12

Rev. Nancy Enderle | Sermon for Sunday, October 17, 2021

This congregation has been reflecting on the book *The Walk* by Adam Hamilton. If you're a visitor or just didn't get a chance to read the book, today is the fifth sermon in the series which has covered what Hamilton outlines as the Five Essential Practices of the Christian Life. Worship. Study. Serving. Giving. Sharing.

Perhaps of all the topics addressed, sharing our faith is the one about which most traditional Presbyterians might feel the least comfortable. Images of street corner evangelists, or memories of uncomfortable questions about the state of our personal salvation, have left many of us apprehensive about sharing our faith. Speaking personally, I have been cornered by more than my fair share of evangelists and each time I come away from the encounter scratching my head in amazement that we read the same Bible and worship the same God. And yet, I contend, there remains something to be learned as we lean into our resistance about how and why we share our faith.

Hamilton lays out a foundation for why sharing our faith is part of the process of living a Christ-centered life. He takes the approach of breaking the process into steps or 5 actions. While my rebellious spirit, which for better or worse I seem to bring to everything, resists being told what to do and how to do it, I do appreciate the intentionality the author recommends. Indeed, he challenges the reader to consider bringing the same intention and practice to our spiritual fitness that we do our physical fitness. In doing so, he emphasizes that our purpose as followers of the living Christ, is to center our lives, **not** around our own self-interest, but rather around a burning, radical realization of God's Spirit within us, everything we encounter, and everyone we meet. I couldn't agree more.

There are a couple of threads I would like to pull concerning the spiritual practice of sharing our faith that have become clearer to me after many years in ministry and listening to the Scripture for today. The first is that we fall short of engaging with the topic of sharing our faith if we get stuck in the words we use. Hamilton gives a nod to this when he quotes St. Francis of Assisi's famous line, "Preach the gospel at all times. When necessary, use words." For years and in several congregations, I have encouraged confirmands to write a personal statement of faith as the culmination of their year of confirmation classes. I've also led adult education classes, new member experiences, and more than one retreat around this type of practice. While it is a good exercise in theory, time and again it became a painful and upsetting assignment for individuals, whether teens or adults. I could almost feel the anxiety people brought to finding the right words, or the fear of saying the wrong thing. And even though as a teacher I would try and break through that, I'm not entirely convinced I ever did.

The truth is words can get in the way. Stating what we believe is a cognitive exercise and if we think our faith is a process that primarily engages our cerebellum, we've landed in the wrong organ. Faith takes root in the heart. Faith grows out of an experience of grace, or to repeat what I said a couple of minutes ago, a burning, radical realization of God's Spirit within us and everything and everyone we encounter.

This emphasis was echoed in the words of Bishop John Shelby Spong who recently died after a long and courageous life as a leader in the Episcopal Church. He wrote, "I define myself above all other things as a believer. I am indeed a passionate believer. God is the ultimate reality in my life. I live in a constant and almost mystical awareness of the divine presence. I sometimes think of myself as one who breathes the very air of God, or to borrow an image from the East, as one who swims in the infinite depths of the sea of God... I am what I would call a God-intoxicated human being. Yet, when I seek to put my understanding of this God into human words, my certainty all but disappears. Human words always contract and diminish my God awareness. They never expand it." From "*Why Christianity Must Change or Die.*"

I love his description of a God-intoxicated human being. What that offers us is a sense of purpose that goes beyond words; that frees us from the performance anxiety I witnessed so many times in confirmands, new members, church officers who were asked to make a statement of belief. Because—and this is at the heart of what I think could free us to share our faith more genuinely—it isn't about us. Finding right or wrong words is a human construct—and faith is not shaped by our actions, our doing, our achieving. In fact, the great irony of this whole topic is that if anything conveys faith it is often in spite of us rather than because of anything we did or said. The Bible is full of examples of that!

The bulletin cover quotation touches upon this as Father Richard Rohr offers, “In prayer, we sit in our emptiness, doing something at which we cannot succeed, and let God’s faithfulness be our only success.”

The passage from 2 Corinthians echoes this—no, blasts this message directly: “For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ.”

Paul goes on to say that this is our “treasure,” this is our light, our gift. What role do we play? Well, he rather unflatteringly reminds us (and dare I say himself?) we are clay pots. Clay. Not that durable. Not that impressive. Not that important. Vessels that contain a precious gift.

Does this take away from the importance of practices to enhance our sharing? I'd say an emphatic 'no.' This treasure deserves the best clay pot we can offer. We live in a world where we are constantly distracted from that treasure. The intention and attention it takes to live from our hearts and keep God at the center of our lives is necessary and helpful. James Finley, a teacher at the Living School says that an intentional focus on our spiritual lives puts in the place of the least resistance to be overtaken by the loving presence of Christ in our hearts. The place of least resistance. Because we know our resistance all too well, don't we? It is the centrifugal force of life that pulls us away from God's presence: the noise, the need to achieve, the desire for affirmation, the search for

status and affection, the pursuit of comfort, the fear that haunts our sense of safety. In the face of these forces that take so much of our daily attention and energy, spiritual practices can provide a center, a structure, an anchor to stop the spinning. They provide opportunities when we are open to rest in God's mercy and grace; where we can meet the love of Christ who offers to shine in and through us.

There is the good news! How we "preach the gospel with our lives" is offered in the first verse of chapter 4: "We HAVE this ministry THROUGH God's mercy." Mercy, grace, forgiveness, LOVE is at the heart of what fuels our ministry; that enables our worship, study, serving, giving and sharing. So when our words fail, and they will, and when we fail, and we will, that LOVE will still shine through us.

I imagine that more than a couple of us are here today because we hunger for the experience of gospel living that Paul describes later in our passage: that though we are afflicted in every way, we will not be crushed; though we might be perplexed, we will not be destroyed, though we may be persecuted, we will not be forsaken, and though struck down, we will not be destroyed. That is our treasure, the gift of having the living Christ shine in our hearts. Each one of us will discover our path to living into that gift and sharing our faith. Some of us will follow the 5 steps Hamilton outlines, some will find other paths. Whatever the path, God will offer us guidance as we seek to put ourselves in the places of least resistance to being overtaken by the burning radical love and mercy of Christ's living presence.

I end with a story that I've heard taught in a couple of ways from the perspective of different traditions. This is the Christian version based on a writing from M. Scott Peck's *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace*.

"Once a great order, a decaying monastery had only five monks left. The order was dying. In the surrounding deep woods, there was a little hut that a Rabbi from a nearby town used from time to time. The monks always knew the Rabbi was home when they saw the smoke from his fire rise above the treetops. As the Abbot agonized over the imminent

death of his order, it occurred to him to ask the Rabbi, who was admired for his wisdom and insight, if he could offer any advice that might save the monastery.

The Rabbi welcomed the Abbot at his hut. When the Abbot explained the reason for his visit, the Rabbi could only commiserate with him. "I know how it is," he exclaimed. "The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore." So the Abbot and the Rabbi sat together discussing the Scriptures and their faiths. The time came when the Abbot had to leave. "It has been a wonderful visit," said the Abbot, "but I have failed in my purpose. Is there nothing you can tell me to help save my dying order?"

The Rabbi paused thoughtfully. "The only thing I can tell you," said the Rabbi, "is that the Messiah is among you."

When the Abbot returned to the monastery, his fellow monks gathered around him and asked, "What did the Rabbi say?"

"He couldn't help," the Abbot answered. "The only thing he did say as I was leaving was that the Messiah is among us. Though I do not know what these words mean."

In the months that followed, the monks pondered this and wondered whether there was any possible significance to the Rabbi's words: 'The Messiah is among us? Could he possibly have meant that the Messiah is one of us monks here at the monastery? If that's the case, which one of us is the Messiah? Do you suppose he meant the Abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbot. Certainly he could not have meant Brother Eldred! Eldred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even so, Eldred is virtually always right. Maybe the Rabbi did mean Brother Eldred. Of course the Rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah?'

As they contemplated in this manner, the monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among

them might be the Messiah and in turn, each monk began to treat himself with extraordinary respect.

It so happened that people still occasionally came to visit the beautiful forest and monastery. Without even being conscious of it, visitors began to sense a powerful spiritual aura. They were sensing the extraordinary respect that now filled the monastery. Hardly knowing why, people began to come to the monastery frequently to picnic, to play, and to pray. They began to bring their friends, and their friends brought their friends.

Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the older monks. After a while, one asked if he could join them. Then, another and another asked if they too could join the abbot and older monks. Within a few years, the monastery once again became a thriving order, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm."

May God bless us to be vessels, clay pots, who hold and share this precious gift. This living Christ.
May it be so, Amen.