

The Church of the Pilgrimage
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Mark 6:1-13

Jesus left there and went to his hometown, accompanied by his disciples. When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed. "Where did this man get these things?" they asked. "What's this wisdom that has been given him? What are these remarkable miracles he is performing? Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his own town, among his relatives and in his own home." He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. He was amazed at their lack of faith. Then Jesus went around teaching from village to village. Calling the Twelve to him, he began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over impure spirits. These were his instructions: "Take nothing for the journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. Wear sandals but not an extra shirt. Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town. And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, leave that place and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them." They went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.

Disciples Now

This week a memory flashed before me -- of a confirmation class here in this church, a few years ago. We were doing an exercise in which a series of statements were read out, and the kids stood in the room, and went to the part of the room that they resonated with. "It is more important for us to show our faith in deeds or it is more important to share our faith in speech." That was the question and I remember how nearly every kid from our church immediately went to the deed side. But one kid stood all by himself in the middle. "I kind of think Jesus wants us to do both" he said.

And that is precisely what I want us to wrestle with today.

Oh, I will admit I have as much baggage about the speech part as anyone. Funny thing for a preacher to say, right? But by speech I mean the sharing our faith one on one style.

Years ago, when I was just in high school I had a boyfriend, who happened to live in Southern Ontario. My parents likely thought this was a very good boyfriend for me to have, because our relationship was mostly letter writing. This boyfriend was a very devout Christian, and one summer we happened to actually be in the same place for some time. My boyfriend had this awesome idea. We could go to the Canadian Exhibition, this huge fair held in Toronto, and we could witness to people in the crowd.

His church and his youth group took the idea of Jesus sending out disciples two by two *very* seriously. He and I had similar t shirts. We'd dress in these shirts, and we'd share our faith, and try to persuade people to come to Jesus. If people were willing, we'd pray with them and for them. Oh my. As it turned out, much to my relief, it rained that day and we did not go to the Exhibition. I had been *spared*.

Though I never really participated in it, I've put that kind of evangelism, that kind of witnessing away. It seems too awkward, too intrusive. It seems to my mind, cut off from human experience, and from faith as we know it in Christian community. It seems too anxiety driven...for my friend believed salvation was assured to those who witnessed in this way, and he was anxious to get to it.

A church member sent a cartoon this week, as if channeling our topic today. Two men at a bus stop, waiting. One is a businessman, in a suit, with a brief case in hand. The other man is wearing a T-shirt with big bold words: "Let's Talk About Jesus" "It guarantees me an entire seat all to myself" he says to the other man. But the idea that we *are* to share our faith, not just in deed but in word as well...what that one confirmand said, the boy in the middle of the room this I do not believe we can so easily dismiss. Jesus sent the disciples out two by two, to share what they'd seen and what they'd learned, something which presumably involved speech. I've always liked that saying "Preach the Gospel. If necessary, use words." Well, sometimes it *is* necessary. (Did you know, by the way, that St. Francis didn't actually say it that way? What he said was a little less direct. He said, "It is no use walking anywhere to preach unless our walking is our preaching.")

There is a storyteller named Michael Lindvall who shares an example of someone doing what the boy in the middle said – doing both. Uniting, if you will, doing the word and speaking the word. It was a graduation ceremony at Emory University several years ago. Honorary degrees were being awarded and the recipients were making the requisite speeches. As is so often the case, the students chatted away through much of it. One speaker, though, caught their attention – a man named Hugh Thompson. "Thompson was probably the least educated person on the platform. He...did not finish college, choosing instead to enlist in the Army, where he became a helicopter pilot."

"On March 16, 1968 he was flying a routine patrol in Vietnam when he happened to fly over the village of Mai Lai just as American troops, under the command of Lieutenant William Calley were slaughtering dozens of unarmed villagers -- old men, women, children. Thompson set his helicopter down between the troops and the remaining civilians. He ordered his tail gunner to train the guns on the American soldiers and he ordered the gunmen to stop killing the villagers... Hugh Thompson's actions saved the lives of dozens of people....he was almost court martialed...and it was thirty years before the Army...awarded him the Soldier's Medal.

As he stood at the microphone the rowdy student body grew still...and then Thompson talked about his faith. Simple words. Speaking of what his parents taught him as a child, Thompson said "They taught me "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." The students were amazed at these words of Jesus, words from Sunday school, words from worship, words of Christian testimony...they leapt to their feet and gave him a standing ovation." (*from Tom Long, Pulpit Resources 32 (January-March 2004) 39*)

Michael Lindvall also shares a story about a woman, a mainline Christian (the UCC would be a mainline church, in case I lost you there) who worked as a clerk in a bookstore. When she arrived for work one morning, she encountered a man dressed as a Hasidic Jew – the long topcoat, the long curls at the side of the face, beard, and top hat. After turning on the lights she asked, "Would you like any help?" "Yes" he answered softly. "I would like to know about Jesus". She directed him to the shops section of books about Jesus and turned to go back downstairs, but he called her back. "No" he said. "Don't show me any more books, tell me what you believe." "My Episcopal soul shuddered" the woman later said. "But she took a big gulp and told him everything she could." (*Feasting on the Word, year B, vol 3, p. 216*)

The point of that story isn't a Christian trying to convert a Jew, of course, but rather how compelling it can be when people share what they know, and what matters to them, and what difference that makes in their life.

In some ways it *is* really hard to share our faith. There are so many so called religious people who seem to stand for everything we believe Jesus stood against. Narrow mindedness. Fear of the stranger. Self-righteousness.

But wait, isn't that all the more reason why we should be thinking about how to share the faith we have, a faith that holds as a central tenet the extravagant love of God, a faith that understands our task in the church to be making real the love and justice of God? Aren't these the very times that compel us to speak?

This week I heard a great story, a story of what following Jesus really looks like. It was about a Pride Parade in the Philippines that featured marchers carrying signs that said things like "I'm sorry for what the church has done" and "I used to be a bible banging homophobe. SORRY." And "Jesus didn't turn people away. Neither do we."

Val Paminano, the pastor at Freedom in Christ ministries, an evangelical and Pentecostal church in the Philippines, told reporters that he and his church have been attending pride marches for about four years now as part of their "I'm Sorry" campaign. What a great story about people changing. And realizing they need to apologize for harm they have caused. And what a great story about what real Christianity looks like. Showing up in solidarity. Being able to apologize. These folks are witnessing to the power of God, made manifest *in them*.

As great as it is to tell that story, and the others before it if this is a sermon about sharing our faith, it follows that we need to be able to tell *our* stories and where we see a Jesus who calls us in them. Like that woman in the bookstore, we need to be able to say what the gospel is to us, and where we see it, or have experienced it. We have had some folks share moments of gratitude this year, and that's been a start. Going deeper with this – well, that might be the stuff of a post-worship conversation. This whole arena of using words, because sometimes it is necessary – this might be something we could do some training in.

It helps, I think, to remember that Evangelism is not “to get them on our side” or even “to grow the church” but simply to tell others about the God who has come to mean so much to us. (Lindvall, p. 216) This is an action taken, performed if you will, out of *love*, not something that comes about because of competition or anxiety about our salvation. Authentic words, words shared in love -- the church needs to offer these things because the world needs these things.

So, if we are keeping our faith a little too quiet, maybe we need to hold onto that image of the disciples going out two by two remembering too what Jesus said about not hiding our light under a bushel. You have light. I have light. And we are called to be disciples, Jesus fellow practitioners today.

So, let's be a little bolder in sharing the light. We never know when we may be helping someone who feels they are walking in darkness, and what blessing will come our way when word and deed are united in our lives for Jesus sake.

Amen.