

Series: "Questions About Life and God"
"Can I share my faith without being a religious fanatic?"

There was this pastor who on a Saturday night, thinking about the Sunday morning worship service, realized he just didn't want to go. He was just kind of tired of working, and decided to call in sick (even though he wasn't sick). When Sunday morning came he got up early, put his golf clubs in the car, and drove several hours to a golf course far enough away that he figured no one would know him. At the golf course he was teamed with 3 other men for the round of golf. Of course, he didn't tell them he was a pastor who had bagged his Sunday morning duties. As it turned out, he played the best round of golf he had ever played. His drives were long and straight. He was chipping right onto the green. His putts were spectacular. And to top it all, on the short 10th hole, he got a hole in one. Well, the men he was playing with were ecstatic for him. And at the end of the round, one of them chimed, "I'll bet you're so excited you can't wait to get back home and tell everybody!" "Yes!" he said. But then he thought to himself: Whom can I tell?

When something good happens to us, the normal thing is that we want to tell somebody! You get engaged. You ace the final exam. You get a promotion at work. Your biopsy comes back negative. You want to tell somebody the good news! When Jesus Christ comes into our life and begins to change us, when we know He has forgiven our sins and assured us of eternal life, that's Good News worth sharing!

In last week's message we looked at how Jesus commanded His followers to share the message about Him with *all people* – we're to do that even though we live in a culture where many might think that's being intolerant of other religions.

1 Peter 3:15 says, "In your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you." "In your hearts revere Christ as Lord" (vs. 15a). Christians believe Jesus is Lord! He is not just another religious leader, but the unique Son of God, sovereign Lord over all! We are sanctify, or revere, Him in our hearts. This verse in 1 Peter also says, "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you" (vs. 15b). The New Living Translation rendering of this verse says, "If someone asks about your Christian hope, always be ready to explain it." We should always be ready to give a rationale for why we are following Christ.

If you are a Christian (a follower of Jesus), when is the last time you talked with someone outside of the church about Jesus, or what you believe about Him? Have you ever led someone to faith in Christ? So often in the church we have sermons and studies on "witnessing for Christ" or sharing our faith. But often we don't get beyond having a discussion about it!

I want to talk more today about sharing our faith, in hopes that if you're not doing it now, you can find some help and begin to do that - and if you are engaged in communicating your faith to others, that you'll get even better at it! The questions we're asking today in this series of sermons is, can I share my faith without coming across as a religious fanatic?

Has anyone ever “witnessed” to you or talked about their religion to you in a way that offended you or turned you off? Once I was waiting for a plane at an airport. A stranger came up and struck a conversation with me. We chit chatted for a minute or so, then out of the blue this person I didn't even know asked me, "Are you a Christian?" I smiled and said, "I'm a pastor." He responded in a tone that felt like I was being scolded. He said, "That's not what I asked you." I could feel myself becoming flushed with anger, and I kind of stammered something out like, "I don't think God appointed you to stand in judgment of my life." This man's style of "witnessing" really offended me.

On another occasion my wife Nancy and I were visiting our daughter and family in South Carolina. At the time they were living just off Hilton Head Island. We went over to Beaufort, and while we were walking along checking out some of the small shops, I noticed on one street corner there was a man with several young children. The man wore a large sandwich board sign that said something like, “Repent, or go to hell.” I admit I was embarrassed by what I saw. I asked our daughter what she thought of this demonstration. Her answer basically was, “He’s crazy”. I can't help but wonder how many people were won to Jesus by his witness.

How can I share my faith without coming across as a religious fanatic? Is there a more winsome approach? I believe there is. Let's look at some suggestions for sharing our faith in a more effective way.

It's good to recognize that there are *various styles* of personal evangelism. What do you think of when you hear the words "evangelism"? Often the things we associate with that word are not very positive! We may think of someone handing out gospel tracks. In one location where we lived often on a Sunday afternoon a man in black clothes and a white shirt would walk through our neighborhood handing out gospel tracts. Or we may associate the word "evangelism" with some televangelist shouting and sweating and doing all types of gyrations and, of course, asking people to send in money for the ministry.

But there are different ways to share the good news of Jesus. There is no one "right way" to communicate our faith to others. Someone has categorized different methods or approaches for faith sharing. Let's look at just a few. *One is called Peter's confrontational approach.* This one is named after Peter, one of Jesus' disciples. Peter was impulsive and probably rather pushy. This style of evangelism, then, is direct, bold, right to the point. It can be aggressive and pushy. It's been also labeled as the "shark" approach. On a positive note, this works with some people, who really need to be directly confronted with their need of Christ. But, as I've already said, the bad thing is that this blunt and direct approach easily turns lot of people off.

Another style of faith sharing is Paul's intellectual approach The Apostle Paul was a scholar and a deep thinker (if you doubt that, read the Book of Romans in the New Testament, a letter written by Paul). This is the approach where you work with ideas and evidence in trying to convince people of the reality and authenticity of the Christian faith. This approach can work well in reaching people who are well educated, or more geared to being logical or rational.

Still another style of personal evangelism is the blind man's testimonial approach. In the Gospel of John, chapter 9, it says Jesus healed a blind man, and when this poor guy kept being interrogated and pestered by the Jewish religious leaders as to who healed him, and how, he finally said, "One thing I do know, I was blind, but now I see" (John 9:25). This approach is where we simply share what Christ is doing in our life, how He's changing us and helping us.

A fourth method of faith sharing identified is Matthew's interpersonal approach. Matthew was a tax collector. In Jesus' time, tax collectors were often dishonest, and not very well liked. Yet when Jesus invited Matthew to follow Him, he did! Afterwards, he invited a whole group of his tax collector buddies to meet Jesus. Luke 5:29 says, "Then (Matthew) gave a great banquet for him in his house; and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others sitting at the table with them." Matthew's relationship with people was a stepping stone to sharing Jesus with them. In this interpersonal style of evangelism, we build relationships with people before we try to share the gospel with them. This is often called "relational evangelism." There's a lot to be said for this approach to sharing our faith, since very few people are won to Christ until a Christian builds a meaningful relationship with that person.

These are just a few of the different styles of personal evangelism, and depending on who we are, our personality, our background, some of these styles will fit us better than others.

There are some Christian leaders who are urging that what is needed in our culture today is something called "servant evangelism". This is where we simply give of ourselves in humble, unselfish service to others. Why is this method encouraged? Because so many people today are skeptical and distrustful of Christians, the Church, Christianity. Often for good reason: the sexual misconduct and cover-ups in the Roman Catholic Church; televangelists who come across as unsavory characters - and in some cases, are; church people who in the eyes of the world are overly judgmental; congregations that seem self-absorbed and unconcerned about community issues and needs. And on top of all this, the caricature of Christians we see on TV and in films. *No wonder people don't trust Christians or their motives!*

So in a sense *Christians have to earn the right to be heard.* And it's only after Christians are willing to get down and dirty and help people and serve people without asking anything in return, that many non-Christians will begin to *listen* to what Christians and the church has to say.

This "servant evangelism" has also been labelled the "Dorcas' Service Approach." Dorcas was a lady in the Bible who witnessed her faith "always doing good and helping the poor" (Acts 9:36). Jesus talked about this kind of "good works" evangelism: "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:14-16).

I agree that "service evangelism" is so much needed in the 21st century where Christians and the church have lost a lot of our credibility. But you know what, *deeds are often not enough!* We

need to be able to clearly communicate the Christian message. We can't assume that just because Christians do nice things in the community to help people that unbelievers are going to understand the message of the Bible or comprehend the claims of Jesus! Just looking at the life of a Christian, no matter how good or loving that Christian may be, isn't going to help an unbeliever understand the meaning of Christ's atonement, or what grace means, or how salvation is found.

It's so important to clearly communicate the content of our faith! That's what Simon Peter is saying in our Scripture text. "If someone asks about your Christian hope, always be ready to *explain* it" (1Peter 3:15). So here's the challenge to each of us – and to churches. *Can I myself take the time and make the effort to grow in my understanding of the Bible and the Christian faith? And can our churches provide opportunities to help people grow in their grasp of the Christian message, and how to communicate it to those outside the church?*

After Peter says we are to always be ready to give a reason for our faith, he goes on to say: "Do it with gentleness and reverence" (1 Peter 3:16). "With *gentleness*" - sensitivity to people's feelings and needs, and "(with) *reverence*" - in a humble spirit before God.

It's important that we be humble and authentic. Unbelievers can spot phoniness in Christians from 10 miles away! To be an effective faith-sharer to people today we have to be *real*, and *genuine*. *Can I be myself? Can I be honest: honest about my struggles - the things I still struggle with, even as a Christian? Can I be honest about my failures?* It's important to show this kind of honesty so we don't come across as being better than the person we're witnessing to (for we're probably not any better).

It's important that we be *compassionate and caring*. The people we witness to can easily sense whether we're doing this because we really care about them, or whether we're just trying to impose ourselves and our beliefs on them.

People matter to God. And it's when people matter to us (regardless of how sinful or resistant they are), that we provide the best setting for us to share our faith in Christ with them.

Harry L. Kaufhold, Jr.
Community United Methodist Church
February 7, 2021

