10-8/9-16 Rev. Amy Haines

Matthew 28:16-20, 2 Timothy 1:1-14

Participating in our Ministries: Participating By Our Witness

At Wonderful Wednesday this week, I asked those present to turn to the person sitting beside them and respond to the following questions:

-share your favorite ice cream flavor

-share your favorite sports team or if you hate sports

-share your favorite Bible character and why- cannot say Jesus

-share who has been an example of faith to you

-tell one another that Jesus loves you

There was a good buzz in the room as each question was answered.

Then I challenged them with this question: What if I were to next ask you to share one example of how Jesus has made a difference in your life? Would you do it? Or would you suddenly make a trip to the restroom? Would you suddenly stop talking and not make eye contact with the person beside you? Or would get on such a roll that I would have to stop you in 2 minutes?

If I were to challenge you with the same question today, would you be willing to spend the next two minutes sharing with someone sitting near you one example of how Jesus has made a difference in your life? Would you do it? Or would you suddenly make a trip to the restroom, or divert the conversation to Friday night’s exciting game or Hurricane Matthew or the latest political revelations or anything but faith?

Today we conclude our sermon series on the vow of membership that asks:

Will you faithfully participate in the ministries of the United Methodist Church by your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service and your witness? These are practical ways that we live out our loyalty to Christ.

Witness, however, is not printed in the membership vows in your hymnal. Witness was not added to the official vows of the church until 2008 when the Association of Annual Conference Lay Leaders requested its addition, to remind members not only to show up but to show forth God’s saving love in all we do. Whereas prayers, presence, gifts, and service can be more inward focused, and more about what we do as a church community, witness reminds us that we are called as disciples of Jesus to engage in God’s mission of transforming the world. That cannot be done only within these walls. --umcdiscipleship.org

By definition, to be a witness is to testify to what we have seen or experienced. This is true in a court of law. This is also true when it comes to our faith. At the heart of Christianity is a call to share our faith, to share our testimonies of God’s presence in our lives, to share our witness of what difference being a Christian makes in our daily existence.

The classic theological term for such a witness is evangelism. Yet evangelism has become associated with such a negative connotation in our world that it has replaced sex and money as That Which Must Not Be Named in most mainline churches.

-- Martha Grace Reese “Unbinding the Gospel” page 4

Consider these first impressions when ordinary people were asked, “What do you think about when you hear the word evangelism?” Typical answers included:

\*No! I don’t want to knock on strangers’ doors and give them some pamphlet.

\*A televangelist is asking for money for the theme park.

\*My college roommate kept hammering me about salvation

and trying to talk me into giving my life to Christ.

\*I know we’re supposed to talk with people about faith and invite them to church,

but I don’t want to lose friends. I feel guilty.

-- Martha Grace Reese “Unbinding the Gospel” p.10-11 adapted

We hear the word evangelism and picture in our minds a street preacher yelling repent the end is near--someone knocking on our door and handing us a track about the five spiritual laws--or a pushy coworker determined to save us according to the way their church defines salvation.

Evangelism has become a negative buzzword in our society today, which is a shame. At its heart the word simply means proclaiming the gospel. At its heart evangelism is about sharing the good news, the evangelion, of Jesus.

Evangelism at its core is faith sharing. It is sharing our witness of God’s mercy and grace. It is telling our testimony of how Christ continues to make a difference in our lives. It is proclaiming our hope of eternal life with God.

Martha Grace Reese reminds us:“The heart of evangelism is being in love with God, being part of a church you love and caring about other people who do not know that faith. Faith sharing focuses on relationships, not ‘bringing in more young people’ or ‘helping our church to grow again.’ --Martha Grace Reese “Unbinding the Gospel” p.5

Carey Nieuwhof argues that: “You can’t be a disciple without being an evangelist. And for sure, the opposite is true. You can’t be an evangelist without being a disciple. But somehow many, many people would rather be disciples without being evangelists.”

--Carey Nieuwhof 2-3-14 careynieuwhof.com/2014/02/

how-the-church-today-is-getting-discipleship-wrong/

We want to follow Jesus, yet we don’t want to tell others about Jesus. We want to be a part of a church, yet not invite others to join us for worship or study or fellowship or service. We want to be a disciple, yet pick and choose what part of discipleship we will engage in.

At the core of our faith as disciples of Jesus is our call to witness to what we have experienced of God’s grace, hope and love in our lives. This call comes explicitly to us through what is known as the Great Commission, Jesus’ parting words to his disciples as proclaimed in Matthew 28.

Jesus came and said to them,

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” (18-20 NRSV)

Jesus’ commission to the 11 disciples is also a commission to us today.

Go Make Disciples Baptize Teach

Go -

No longer can the church get away with simply opening their doors on a Sunday morning and expecting men and women to flock to the church. Rather, we are called and commissioned to go out, to meet people where they are. Ball fields and boardrooms. Kitchens and carry outs. We are called to go to our neighbors and family members, our classmates and coworkers.

Go, Make Disciples-

This is the meat of Jesus’ call. We are called not to be disciples, but to make disciples. As we lead others to Christ we in turn will become more like Christ. We are not called to go and make members. We are called to go and make disciples. How are we assisting men and women, boys and girls, children, teens and adults to grow deeper in their journey with Jesus? How does what we do and say in this congregation support our growth as disciples as well as support our growth as evangelists proclaiming what God has done in our lives? I love how Eugene Peterson translates this verse: “Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life.”

Go, Make Disciples, Baptize-

Baptism reminds us that we are not alone. Baptism is a sign and symbol of God’s grace in our life, and that we commit to living in response to such grace that goes before us, grace that saves us, and grace that draws us deeper into discipleship. When a person is baptized, regardless of age, we witness to God’s presence and celebrate that faith is not possible without God’s grace.

Go, Make Disciples, Baptize, Teach-

Again, in the words of Eugene Peterson- “instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you.” Teach them to obey everything I have commanded you. When a person claims that Jesus loves them and proclaims that they love Jesus, then what? What is their next step? As a community of faith we have an obligation to offer ways to learn more what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. This means we offer Sunday School classes and study groups. We offer ways to practice our faith through service opportunities and sharing our gifts. We learn more by living out our faith in practical ways. We learn through watching and doing how to share our faith stories with others.

This Great Commission is a daunting call. Yet remember, and dare I say, cling to, Jesus’ final words: “And remember, I am with you always.” “I’ll be with you as you do it, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age.”

Paul echoes Jesus’ words as he writes to a young disciple named Timothy.

Join me in suffering for the gospel.

Rely on the power of God.

Don’t be ashamed of this good news, or those who share it, or the One who gives it.

Rekindle the gift of God that is within you.

The call to witness to our faith is hard. Yet most Christians who I encounter struggling with this call are not so much ashamed of the gospel as they are fearful of sharing their faith with others.

They say:

"I am afraid I might do more harm than good."

"I am afraid I won’t know what to say."

"I am afraid I might fail."

"I am afraid I might be a hypocrite."

Perhaps the most common fear, however, is that of being rejected.

A survey was given to those attending training sessions for the Billy Graham crusade in Detroit.

One question asked, "What is your greatest hindrance in witnessing?" 9% said they were too busy to remember to do it. 28% felt the lack of real information to share. 12% said their own lives were not speaking as they should. But by far the largest group were the 51% whose biggest problem was the fear of how the other person would react! None said they didn't really care.

--Leighton Ford, Motivations of the Early Church for Witness, Good News is for Sharing, P. 25-7. Sermonillustrations.com:Witnessing, adapted

We are afraid how other people will react when we witness to our experience of Christ in our lives. Yet, as I have told the Bright Beginnings kids in children’s church this week, the psalmist declares, “I will trust in God and am not afraid.” (Ps 56:4)

Remember that your witness is your story of God’s story in your life. And if it is a God story, it will witness to God’s power. And as you witness, you will be a messenger for Christ, in the words of Acts 1, in Judea, in Jerusalem and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. We might translate that today to remind us that we are called to be witnesses for Christ in Springboro, in Warren County and to all nations of the world.

Are we called to go door to door and ask if our neighbors are saved? No. Are we called to shout the good news from the front door of Kroger or from the top row of the stadium? No.

We are called to be witnesses for Christ to our family and our friends, our neighbors and our coworkers, to all we encounter near and far. And that witness will be not only in how we share our prayers and presence, how we live out our gifts and our service in this congregation and this community, but will also be evident in our words to those around us.

When was the last time you offered to pray for a coworker? When was the last time you invited a friend to worship with you? When was the last time you shared your story of faith to relate to what someone else is going through?

John White reminds us:

..A good witness isn't like a salesman, getting to know a person only to push a product. Rather, a good witness is like a signpost. It doesn't matter whether old, young, pretty, or ugly; a good witness has to point the right direction and be able to be understood. We are witnesses to Christ, so we are to point to him.

--John White, The Fight, sermonillustrations.com:Witnessing, edited

We are also called to plant seeds of faith, to offer our stories and the opportunity to know Jesus, and to trust the Holy Spirit to work in the lives of others, if they are willing.

..In 1858 a Sunday School teacher, Mr. Kimball, led a Boston shoe clerk to give his life to Jesus Christ. The clerk was Dwight L. Moody who became an evangelist. In 1879 while preaching in England the heart of a pastor named F.B. Meyer was set on fire, who later came to an American college campus to preach. Under his preaching a student by the name of Wilbur Chapman was saved. He engaged in YMCA work and employed a former baseball player named Billy Sunday, to do evangelistic work. Billy Sunday held a revival in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Because the revival stirred the hearts of many, some 30 business men wanted to devote a day of prayer for Charlotte. In May of 1934 a farmer lent the men some land to use for their prayer meeting. The leader of the business men, Vernon Patterson prayed, "Out of Charlotte the Lord would raise up someone to preach the Gospel to the ends of the earth." The business men then called for another evangelistic meeting asking Mordecai Ham, a fiery Southern evangelist who shattered the complacency of church-going Charlotte. The farmer who lent his land for the prayer meeting was Franklin Graham and his son Billy became a Christian during the meeting.

Who would have ever dreamed or imagined that because a Sunday School teacher told a young man about Jesus it would turn out the likes of Billy Graham.

--Darren Ethier 11-00 “It Just Happened!” sermoncentral.com adapted

Most of us will never be as famous as Billy Graham. Some of you here today may even have no idea who Billy Graham is. For those who don’t know he was the most well known and beloved American evangelist in the 20th century, known throughout the world. He would hold Crusade rallies where he would pack stadiums and arenas like a modern day rock star, with millions of people coming to accept Jesus as their personal savior through those Crusades. He has preached the gospel to more people in person than anyone else in history, from housewives and coal miners to presidents and CEOs. Billy Graham will be 98 years old this year, and still prays for revival.

I imagine if Billy Graham was to miraculously visit with us today, he would also say that your story is not his story, your witness is not his witness. Your story is unique to you, in the way that Jesus has made a difference in your life.

If you struggle to believe that you have a witness, consider how you would answer the following three questions:

What were you like before you knew Jesus? What brought you to Jesus?

How has Jesus made and continues to make a difference in your life?

Your witness does not have to be a treatise on these responses. Your witness could be as short as a 2-3 sentence response to each question. Your witness does not have to be longer than 3-5 minutes total.

Remember your witness is your witness. Not mine, not Billy Graham’s, not your parents or the person sitting next to you.

Chuck Swindoll reminds us:

“The skeptic may deny your doctrine or attack your church, but he cannot honestly ignore the fact that your life has been changed.” --Chuck Swindoll, *Come Before Winter*

Consider those who shared their faith with you. What was their testimony? What did they say or how did they live that invited you to know Jesus?

Consider now your testimony. How has Jesus made a difference in your life? When was the last time you told someone else about that difference?

Think close to home for a moment—how many of your family members, friends, and co-workers, or even maybe some of you here this morning—how many men and women around us still have doubts about Jesus and so struggle to believe, or they believe in Jesus but blow off his call rather than take seriously what it means to be a disciple?

How many of our neighbors are rarely in church except for funerals, weddings, or handouts and how many of our neighbors’ children only hear the good news of Jesus at something like Vacation Bible School?

Far and near, there are millions still in our world today who have not heard or do not care about the love of Jesus. Because of this great need, we all are called today to take Jesus’ Great Commission seriously, to recognize our purpose as ordinary disciples of Jesus to share the extraordinary good news of God. To be missionaries not just on Sunday mornings, but every day, every week, every year, in all areas and in all relationships in our lives.

If you believe that only the professionals are good at making disciples and bringing people into the church, think again.

..All the research of unchurched people who join the church say that 75-80% of them were brought into the church by their friends and personal acquaintances. Only 9% were brought by pastors and only 2% by Sunday school teachers. It is always through the power of friends and friendship that lifelong learners are really made.

--Edward Markquart, sermonsfromseattle.com, adapted

Don’t be ashamed of your witness of how Jesus has made a difference in your life. Don’t be afraid at how small your faith story may appear to be. You never know how what you have experienced may speak to another person.

If you have never truly embraced the good news of Jesus in your life, if you have never said yes to God’s forgiveness of your sins and offer of new life as a follower of Jesus, wait no longer than this morning to embrace the joy of this gospel message.

And if you have found yourselves wavering in your faith, embarrassed by your faith or your lack of faith, rekindle the gift of God within you this morning. Wait no longer to reclaim your call as a follower of Jesus, a member of the body of Christ.

You have a story to share. You are a witness to Christ. As I said last week, You are the only Bible a non-Christian may ever read.

I have a challenge for you today. The next time you eat with family or close friends, be vulnerable with one another. Share in 3-5 minutes how Jesus has made a difference in your life.

Listen to one another. Pray for one another. Respect one another’s witness, as our stories will be as unique as we are.

Kids, do you know the faith story of your parents?

Husbands, do you know the faith story of your wife?

Do you know the faith story of the person seated in front of you?

We all have a story- or two- to share. We all are called to be witnesses to the transforming power of God’s grace.

Today concludes our sermon series participating in the ministries of the church. Yet as brothers and sisters in Christ, as members together of the community of faith, continue to find the practical ways to respond to God’s grace through your prayers and your presence, and through sharing your gifts, your service and your witness.

May our words and our lives, our actions and our attitudes, reflect God’s grace and love to the world around us.

Go and be witnesses to the grace, the love and the hope of God found in Jesus Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

May it be so.

Let us pray.