

SET YOUR FACE TO...BE USED

September 20, 2009

Rev. Wendy Miller Olapade

1 Peter 3:15b-16a

Hope Church

Note: This is the second in a series of four sermons on the themes of evangelism and hospitality, delivered in conjunction with Hope's move to Jamaica Plain and toward union with Central Congregational Church.

There is a "Peanuts" comic strip in which Linus is listening carefully as his sister, Lucy, boasts about her religious faith and her potential as an evangelist.

She says to Linus: "I could be a terrific evangelist. Do you know that kid who sits behind me in school? I convinced him that my religion is better than his religion."

Linus asks: "How did you do that?" Lucy replies: "I hit him with my lunch box."

I want to say up front : that I know that many of us hear the word evangelism and this is the gist of what we think and feel about evangelists – they hit us with their lunch boxes and believe that their religion is better than ours.

And I know that this is not what we at Hope Church feel about our religion nor is lunch box battle what we will do in order to share with others the amazing grace of God as we understand God and the delight and goodness of belonging to this fellowship we call Hope Church.

Yet, we do need to share that good news. And sharing the gospel, the good news of God's love through Jesus-- is what evangelism is all about. We need to be evangelists – God needs for us to share the way of Jesus, the life and morality and quality of relationships that we have been taught by our scriptures and Christian history.

So I say, we just have to transform our image of evangelism. We have to transform the world's image of evangelism. In fact we have to take back that word from the religious right. Progressives need to show the world that the Christianity is not about lunch box battles—but that is a different sermon, so we'll put that topic on the shelf for a bit.

But we do have to find a way to share the gospel in a way that is authentic to us – because there are so many people who need this good news. So many people whose lives could be changed by the very same good news that changed your life.

Bart Campolo, is a well know urban minister, and he's not your typical Christian evangelist. In his buzz cut and combat boots, he looks more like Vanilla Ice than one of those well-dressed people who knock on suburban doors and offer to tell you the Good News. When you ask him why he's dedicated his life to the struggling churches of north Philadelphia, he doesn't mention God at all. Instead, he tells you that one in four young African-American males in this country is under some form of correctional supervision - jail, probation or parole.

He also tells you what he has seen in recent years: a new baby boomlet of disaffected youth, raised in an era of crack cocaine and absent fathers, that is learning to play Mortal Kombat with real guns.

Although he fiercely opposed the 1996 welfare cuts, Campolo will readily grant that government programs can't reach these kids. "What they really need is one adult who's willing to be a mentor - talk to them, show them the ropes," he says. That's where the church comes in. "Even if I didn't believe in God, I would work in the inner-city church. It's the one hierarchical institution left in these communities." -Robert Worth, "Amazing Grace: Can churches save the inner city?" *National Ten Point Coalition home page, <http://www.yesamerica.org/NTLF.html>*

The need for people mentoring people, the need for people caring for people, the need for one person to love another person is universal. And this is what the church is all about. This is what being Christians is all about. Loving God and loving neighbor. Going out, sharing the good news and bringing others into one's community of faith –a community of faith that can care for and teach each other and inspire you to go out and love your neighbor.

Now some of you, in fact may be comfortable with sharing your faith and even had success in encouraging another to join you on this walk. Some of you, like me, may have tried witnessing and discovered that your “victim” was squirming, looking at their watch, yawning, staring at the ground, nodding their head politely (with a grimace), and it seemed that they were often in a hurry to get away. Now it may have been that God’s Spirit was convicting them. It also could have been that with my approach--God’s Spirit couldn’t get through to them.

So, as we set our face to Jamaica Plain and the next chapter of the story of Hope Church, we want to do some learning about how to witness, how to share the good news in a way that God’s Spirit can get through and we are a channel of grace and hospitality and invitation and encouragement.

The best training you could have in sharing your faith probably comes from the Bible. Imagine that! In fact, there’s one verse that pretty much sums up the whole process. For the next little while, with the help of work done by Steve May, a Missionary and Author, we’re going to scrutinize this verse and try to learn all that it has to teach us about sharing our faith.

If the idea of sharing your faith with another person scares you to death, you are not alone. The fact is, many Christians feel that way. We’re intimidated by the idea of witnessing—but it’s not because we don’t love Jesus or we don’t love the lost. It’s because we don’t know what sharing their faith really means.

So we will dispel some of the myths we have about witnessing. And unlearn some of the erroneous techniques that may have been hammered into you in the past.

We will discover that sharing your faith with others is the most natural thing in the world, like talking about your children, your vacation, or your favorite restaurant or football team.

We will discover that witnessing is not verbal combat; it’s not a war of the wits; and it has nothing at all to do with your own personal powers of persuasion. Witnessing is simply a matter of telling your story about who and what you love and what that has done for you.

So, if you feel nervous about the idea of telling someone about Jesus—or just telling someone about your faith community, I want you to relax. Listen to these next few sermons, take notes along the way, and soon, I have no doubt that your response will be, first of all, “I can do that!” and secondly, “I can’t wait to try it!”

So the text: 1 Peter 15-16a: ***Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect...***

This is St. Peter’s seminar on how to share your faith. Today, we’ll look at the first part of the verse: “Always be prepared.” What does this mean? What does it mean to always be prepared to give an answer for the hope that you have? Here are three things you can do to prepare yourself to witness to others. First of all...

1. Know what you believe.

One reason we’re sometimes reluctant to witness is that we don’t feel completely confident in our knowledge of the basics of our beliefs. Some people think that because they do not have a graduate degree in theology, they’re not qualified to talk about their faith. That’s not true.

The Christian faith is powerful because it is simple. It doesn’t rest on complicated theories and formulas that only a scholar can understand. It rests on simple truth.

If you want a quick summary of what Christians believe, you could look at the creeds that we use in the UCC and DOC to guide our understanding. The Apostle’s Creed, written before the New Testament is one, the Nicene Creed (written about 200 years later) is another – these are the classics. Some congregations recite a creed every week, which I think is a great idea, because it outlines the fundamentals of our faith. It testified and gives us something to study and discuss when we are processing what guides us in faith.

But ours is a non-creedal tradition, which means that we use the creeds as guidance, as testimony, as witness to what Christians throughout history believed—so that we can form our own sense of what we believe. In the

UCC we say that the creeds that inform us are “testimonies--not tests of faith”. In the DOC it is said that the “only creed is Christ”.

One of the creeds that I love is called a New Creed and it comes from the United Church of Canada. You have a copy in your program – let us pray it together:

We are not alone,
we live in God's world.

We believe in God:
who has created and is creating,
who has come in Jesus,
the Word made flesh,
to reconcile and make new,
who works in us and others
by the Spirit.

We trust in God.

We are called to be the Church:
to celebrate God's presence,
to live with respect in Creation,
to love and serve others,
to seek justice and resist evil,
to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen,
our judge and our hope.

In life, in death, in life beyond death,
God is with us.

We are not alone.
Thanks be to God.

These are the basics of what Christians believe.

And it is the responsibility of the leadership of this church to teach the basics of the Christian faith. It is also the responsibility of you, the believer, to go the second mile and learn more about and define for yourself how the basics inform your own sense of faith.

Many people are afraid that if they get into a witnessing situation they might be asked a question that they don't know how to answer. I've been witnessing for 15 years, and I still get asked questions I can't answer, because there are many questions for which there are no easy answers.

For example, the theodicy question comes up all the time: “Why is there so much suffering in the world? If God loves us, why does God let children starve to death?” Philosophers and theologians have struggled with this question for centuries, and volumes have been written on this subject. There is not an easy answer to this question. You can't resolve the problem of pain in a 30-second sound bite. Neither can you memorize a pat answer that will placate those who ask this question.

But we do know this: God is good and merciful; God doesn't cause human suffering. God came into this world to put an end to it. God offers comfort to those who are in pain. And more importantly, God challenges us to reach out to the suffering and do what we can to help. I don't have the answer for why people suffer, but I do have the answer for what we are supposed to do about it: we're to get involved.

The first part of being prepared to share your faith with others is to build a foundation of knowledge about what you believe. Does this mean that you should wait until you know it all before you talk to someone else? No. But it does mean that the more you know about what you believe, and how your un-belief is a working part of your faith journey and your acceptance here at Hope church = the more effective you will be in witnessing. So, make an effort to know what you believe, what you are still working on, and what doesn't work for you.

Secondly, being prepared means that you should...

2. Know your testimony.

Some of the best advice we can get is to develop your testimony—to put it together in an organized fashion and practice it. Don't memorize it word for word, but put enough thought into it to be able to define the most significant events of your faith journey so that you can share your story with others.

We're not talking about a 40 minute dissertation on all the sins you committed and how church stopped you from committing those sins. In fact, if you're talking to someone one-on-one, I would say that 3 minutes is as long as it should take.

Your testimony consists of three things.

Part One: What events in your life caused you to seek a relationship with God?

Part Two: How did you come into a relationship with God or Jesus?

Part Three: What has happened since? In other words, what difference has your faith walk or knowing Jesus made in your life?

In AA, we witness all the time – and we tell newcomers, when it is time for them to “tell their story” to say: what it was like, what happened and what it's like now.

I have learned over the years that what I say in three minutes of my story has more impact than 100 hours of preaching. Your most powerful tool in sharing your faith with others is your personal testimony—what Faith, God, Jesus, Higher Power, the Holy spirit... has done in your life.

Witnessing isn't about preaching to people. It's about telling your story. And your story, whether you realize it or not, is powerful. It's worth taking the time to learn how to share it with others.

In the Gospel of John there's a story of Jesus healing a blind man. The Pharisees tried to discredit Jesus, and confronted the man saying, “This man [Jesus] is a sinner.” The man gave a classic response...”Whether he is a sinner or not I do not know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see.” (John 9:25)

The man couldn't cite chapter and verse to support the argument that Jesus was the promised Messiah. He didn't have the knowledge to say, “Well, if you look at this verse in Isaiah you'll see that Jesus is the fulfillment of certain prophecies, and if you'll turn with me now to the book of Daniel I can show you five reasons why the Old Testament supports the idea that Jesus of Nazareth is the promised Messiah...” He couldn't say that. He could only say, “I was blind, but now I see.” There's no argument that stands up to that, because you can't refute a changed life.

When you share your testimony with someone, even if it's as simple as “I was blind, but now I see,” your words have tremendous impact. Because when you tell someone about the difference Jesus has made in your life, you begin to give them hope that maybe he can make a difference in their life, too. When you share with someone that your faith community has changed the quality of your life, you give them hope that Hope may be good for them too.

Being prepared means knowing what you believe, knowing your testimony, and thirdly...

3. Knowing that God will give you the chance to witness.

Peter says in this verse, “Be prepared.” The word that is translated “prepared” appears in others translations as “be ready always.” There's a sense where “be prepared” means that we should do our homework and learn what we need to learn, and there's a sense where “be prepared” means always to be ready to witness, because

the chance could come at any time. Like being ready to go to the hospital when you are nine months pregnant. You bag is packed, you've had your Lamaze class, you know how to get to the hospital and you know the number to call when your water breaks.

That's what it means to be ready. On a moment's notice, be prepared to talk to someone about your faith, because you never know when the opportunity will come up. When it does come, you don't want to be thinking, *I wish I was ready for this*.

You would be amazed how often the subject comes up – if you are ready. People are in need—spirituality is a universal human need. We all have a God shaped hole within us and so many do not have a sense of a God that can fill it – so they fill that hole with other things. Would it not be a gift, if you were able to tell the story of how your God shaped hole is filled by the faith you practice and the faith community you share.

Friends, Sharing your faith is not a situation where you're constantly trying to force things to happen...where you're bulldozing your way into conversations and preaching to people who would rather be doing anything in the world but listening to you. It's not a matter of trying to shove square pegs into round holes. Sharing your faith is simply telling your story about who you love and what the love has done for you.

It's good news, and it offers people hope. People are desperately seeking hope, and they're eager to hear good news. They don't want to be preached at, they don't want to be condemned, they don't want to be on the receiving end of a polished Gospel sales presentation, and they certainly don't want to be hit with a lunch box—but they do want hope. If you'll do your homework, and get your heart ready, God will open the door of opportunity for you to tell your story to people who are ready to hear it.

Additional Resource: Sermon by Steve May (Preaching Today) A resource of Christianity Today International