

## SET YOUR FACE TO...OPEN THE DOOR

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1 Peter 3:15b-16a

Hope Church

*Note: This is the third 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.*

We're in the Third sermon of our series on hospitality and evangelism. And today's message is about how to Talk to Other people about faith, how to open the door to a conversation about Jesus." Last time, we talked about being prepared, being ready. The three key elements of the message last week are:

1. Know what you believe,
2. know your story or your testimony, know what you would say were you given a chance to say it); and
3. know that God will give you the chance to tell others about God. There will be moments when you will be asked.

This week, we'll take a practical look at how put this message into action. My friends, God will give you the opportunity to witness—so how do you recognize the opportunity and how do you take advantage of it?

As we observed last time, 1 Peter 3:15 is the foundational verse for this series. It is a two-sentence seminar on how to share your faith.

***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.***

Today we're going to focus the middle of the lesson, on how to grab hold of the witnessing opportunities that are all around. Peter's words are:

***...give an answer to everyone who asks...***When we share our faith with others, we need to attend to three things. First,

### **1. Make sure there is an indication of interest.**

Maybe you have had this experience--sitting down to dinner with your family, when the phone rings, and you answer it and a voice you don't recognize seems to recognize yours. "Wendy! How's it going?"

"Fine," you say, thinking it's someone you know.

And then he starts his spiel, sounding just like an AM radio deejay: "Hey, just wanted to let you know about this fantastic investment opportunity that I think would be just fabulous for you..." and with that, he's off to the races.

You don't like to be rude to people, so you decide that when he stops to take a breath, you would politely let him know that you aren't interested. But you had no idea how long he could go without taking a breath. He never asks you if you are even slightly interested in hearing about his fabulous investment opportunity. He just assumes that you are, since you are (in his words) a sharp, intelligent, success-minded individual. Finally, thinking he has you in the grip of his pitch, he asks you a question: "Wendy, wouldn't it be nice to be able to provide your family with rock-solid financial security?"

And you say, "Yes, as a matter of fact, it would. But right now my food is getting cold and this is not a good time for me to talk." You expect him to apologize for interrupting your meal and ask if he could call back, to which you could say, "No, thank you."

But, this is what he says next: "Wendy, this deal is too important to put off. When you hear me out, you'll agree that delaying a meal for a few minutes is a small price to pay for financial success."

At this point of course, you're annoyed, your spouse is annoyed, your kids are throwing food, and you throw civility out the window and say, "Sorry, but I'm hungry now. I'll get rich later." And you hang up.

Now, tell me by a show of hands. How many of you think you missed out on the opportunity of a lifetime by cutting that conversation short? Anyone? O.K.

How many of you think you avoided a scam, or at the very least, an extremely questionable investment? Everyone?

We'll never know for sure, will we? We'll never know. His deal may have been legitimate, but his approach was so offensive, you couldn't bring yourself to listen to it. You weren't rejecting the idea of investing money. You were rejecting him.

Some "How To" models of evangelism...the "Hit you over the head with your lunch box model" encourage the evangelist to "Remember, they're not rejecting you, they're rejecting the message." But friends, that is not always the case. Often it is not the message that offends a non Christian; it is the messenger.

Steve May, the author and teacher whose wisdom forms the basis of this series, tells the story of a single mother from his church who told him that one Saturday morning she was at the laundromat with her three small children. The place was full of people, and she was juggling a half dozen loads of laundry between the washers and the dryers and the counter where you sort and fold your clothes, while, at the same time, trying to keep an eye on her children to make sure they didn't tear the place up or run off with a stranger, and she was doing all of this in a race with the clock because she had to get home and get ready for work. And then a man approached her and wanted to know if she was saved. As May tells it, she wasn't at that time. She needed to hear the good news. And she knew in her heart that she needed to hear it, but he couldn't have picked a worse time to talk to her. She told her pastor, "If he had at least offered to help me fold my clothes, I not only would have gone to church with him, I would have married him." She was under an enormous amount of stress that day, and he was clueless. Her story has a good ending, because a few years later she did find faith. But it wasn't because a stranger approached her on a busy day at the laundromat.

When we talk to someone about Jesus, when we share the joys of our engagement with Hope Church, when we celebrate the mission we've been called to, we need to make sure the timing is right.

Friends, if a person has no relationship with God, if they are isolated from God's people, if they are self focused and not neighbor-focused, if they are not living a life of love; there is likely nothing more important in all the world than for them to hear the gospel. When you consider what is at stake, being a few minutes late for work is really quite insignificant. You know that, but they don't—especially if they've never met you before. For all they know, you're just a smooth-talking salesperson.

Peter said, "**Give an answer to everyone *who asks...***" In other words, give them the opportunity to indicate an interest. Sharing your faith doesn't mean cornering strangers and preaching at them while they're in the middle of doing something else. Our message is important. In fact, it's so important that we are obligated to take the extra effort to make sure the time is right and they are ready to hear us—or else they just might reject the messenger and refuse to hear the message for a long time to come.

Am I saying that we shouldn't talk to strangers about Jesus? That we shouldn't share our faith with people we do not know... No, not at all. But we do need to be sensitive to the circumstances and give them an opportunity to show interest.

This applies not only to strangers, but to our friends as well. Be sensitive to the circumstances and give them an opportunity to show interest. We're not talking about arranging a faith intervention with someone who is not ready. Our friends do not need to be ambushed; thinking you are getting together for one thing only to find you nervously talking, fast and loud, leaving them crouched down in their chair like a cornered animal. You may find them striking back, "Listen, I'm not interested in this, so get off my back, you crazy religious fanatic."

Our friends—when they realized they can open up to us without getting hit on the head with a Bible—will seek the conversations in which they ask—why are you so peaceful, why are you so settled, what do you do on Sunday evenings (or in the case of some of you, what do you do with all of your spare time), what is this relationship with God that seems to have changed your life; what is that project that you are working on about local food that you're so excited about, why do you feel like your kids should be a part of a community that

cares for others, why are you walking for hunger, who are those people you knit with every week, why are you smiling so much these days, how did you get through that cancer without going crazy, how do you stay sober and still be happy, how is it that your church accepts you as a transgender person...I could do this all night...but you get the point?

And we do not want to make this mistake with our children either. Of course you want your children to have a dynamic relationship with faith, but you can't beat it into them—figuratively or literally. When you talk to them about church, God, Jesus, make sure they are receptive to what you are saying. Many of you already know this – but most days offer an opportunity to have a serious conversation with children about some aspect of living a faithful, Godly, merciful, humble, justice seeking life. And do you know what? Rarely, if ever, do you need to bring it up. Most often, either the circumstance or the kid comes to you. You talk to them about it when they're ready to talk; and as they get older, that will be more and more often. Friends, with our kids, I would argue that it is not evangelism, it is just parenting: every aspect of living life is a question of faith.

So again, when you share your faith, first be sensitive to the circumstances and make sure the other person has indicated an interest in what you're saying. Secondly...

## **2. Make sure it's a dialogue, not a monologue.**

Maybe you may have observed this scene too... you overhear a conversation, maybe at work, maybe at a party, maybe even at the grocery store (although probably not here in JP), except it isn't a conversation—it's a monologue. Two people, the one doing all the talking, telling the one doing all the listening how wonderful it is to be a Christian. The listener looks extremely uncomfortable, and the talker seems to be completely unaware. And there is colleague standing there at the water cooler telling you that the same person cornered him in the coffee room the day before and had talked non-stop for half an hour.

This is NOT what Peter had in mind. The phrase “give an answer to everyone who asks” implies that there is some give and take going on. Asking and answering, back and forth. It's a dialogue.

When we share our faith—we need to continually ask ourselves, “Am I doing all the talking? Am I including them in this conversation, or am I just preaching at them?” If they're not asking questions, if they're not making comments, if there's no give and take in the conversation, you're losing them and their interest.

This is the exact opposite of how some are taught to witness. The “hit you over the head with your lunch box” model of evangelism prepares folk with what they presume to be a sure-fire sales pitch to memorize. It includes some questions to ask the other, but teaches that you do not answer their questions! It suggests that trying to answer a question would only get you off track. It even suggests that people will sometimes ask a question as a “diversionary tactic” to intentionally get you off the subject...they'll try to trick you into not telling them about Jesus.

Friends, this is the kind of thing they tell vacuum cleaner salesmen, or encyclopedia salesmen, or any other salesman for that matter. A salesman's job is to persuade a prospect to purchase a product. And a good salesman can do that whether the prospect needs it or not. When a prospect asks a question that has the potential of taking the salesman off track, he skillfully deflects the diversionary tactic and gets back to his pitch. When the prospect raises an objection, the salesman is ready with an answer.

“But I can't afford your vacuum cleaner.”

“Oh, but our model is energy-efficient, unlike the BrandX model you currently use, so with our model you'll see dollars shaved off your utility bill every month. In fact, if money is the issue, you can't afford **not** to buy our vacuum cleaner, because the money you save in electricity will more than cover the cost of our economically priced unit. And what's more, it purrs like a kitten; you can barely hear it run—you'll be able to watch your soaps while you do your housework! So, I guess that settles it. There's nothing hold you back now, is there? Do you want to pay for this with a check, or would you prefer to put it on your credit card?”

That may work in sales, but it doesn't work in witnessing. People don't like to be “sold.” If they think you're only interested in getting them to “buy your religion”, they'll avoid you like the plague.

Friends, if we even assume the existence of diversionary questions we're taking the wrong approach to sharing our faith. When we share our faith, when we tell our story, when we witness to the love of God through Jesus, we want people to ask questions. We pray that they will ask questions. Because the more they talk about the things of faith that they don't understand, the closer they're getting to finding a faith that works for them.

We don't look at people with whom we want to share our faith as prospective customers, **or** as potential tithers. We see them as friends. When you talk to a friend, we don't demand that the conversation adhere to our chosen path, we let it go whichever direction it happens to go.

One of the biggest mistakes we make when we share our faith, when we witness, even when we are just being a friend with someone, is to "take charge" of the conversation and keep it on track. People see through that, and they equate it with salesmanship, not friendship. When you talk to people about the Lord, when you tell them about the love you experience through your church, make sure it's a dialogue, not a monologue.

Finally, when you share your faith...

### **3. Look for ways to nudge the door open.**

I think this is about not hiding your faith, about integrating how you think and live and spend your time as a church attending, faith practicing, God believing person into everything that you do. This is about NOT compartmentalizing your and church life from the rest of your life.

In so doing, you open the door to these kinds of conversations.

May writes of a conversation he had the day he enrolled his son in grade school. He struck up a conversation with the school principal, who didn't know yet that he was a preacher, or a Christian. But during the conversation she casually mentioned that she sings in a choir and a few minutes later, when talking about the school's new technology center she said, "This is an answer to prayer. Last year I asked God to give us some new computers for the school, and look what happened!" Later she even told May that she prays for each of the children by name.

She had no idea that she was talking to a "fellow religious" but she was nudging the door open, letting him know that he could talk to her about spiritual things if he wanted to. I soon discovered that many parents come to her advice when their kids get into trouble, and she is able to support them both practically and spiritually.

When people ask you how your weekend was, tell them that you spend the morning on Saturday cleaning out an old storage closet at the church, or how great the music was on Sunday during worship, or how much fun it was to walk through Roxbury for hunger. Tell them about the stuff that brings you joy – or the stuff that makes you crazy about this thing that is so central to your life and the lives of your family. This is not about a bible lesson – it is about opening the door so that people know you are on the other side should they want to walk through.

Let people know that you're available...that they can talk to you about matters of faith when they're ready. They might not feel comfortable pouring out their soul the first day they meet you, but if you keep nudging the door, eventually they'll open it all the way.

Peter tells us "Be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks..."

Let me tell you something. They will ask. When they see the difference in your life, they will ask. When they get a glimpse of your joy, they will ask. When they see you endure trials, or refuse to compromise your convictions, or respond to harsh treatment with loving forgiveness, they will ask. And when they do, you'll be ready to say, "This is what God has done for me, and this is what God can do for you."

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