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1 Peter 3:15b-16a

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Note: This is the fourth 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.

In the early 1980's one of the highlights of the academic year at the University of Oklahoma was when Sister Cindy came to town. Sister Cindy was a street preacher. She was in her early twenties and quite pretty, in a hippie, dippy sort of way. She had long brown hair, and she always wore a big bonnet-type hat, and an ankle length cotton dress.

She arrived each spring, a week or two before the students began gearing up for finals. She would ascend the platform in front of the student union, open her Bible, and begin to preach with all of her might.

So far, so good—nothing wrong with that. But Sister Cindy's message was, to say the very least, confrontational. As students passed by she would scream at them, warning them of God's impending wrath. Needless to say, she never failed to draw a crowd. Within minutes there would be 150-200 students gathered around platform, listening to her, laughing at her, heckling her, even throwing things at her.

It never phased Sister Cindy. The more unruly the crowd became, the more she told them they were on the fast track to hell. And she spelled out their sins in graphic detail. Her favorite word seemed to be "whoremonger." Now, don't get offended; the word appears in the Bible—about a half-dozen times in all. Cindy, however, would use it that many times in a single sentence. Most of the Okies had no idea what it meant, but she was convinced that's what all the guys were. As for the girls in the crowd—especially the ones who wore make-up, shorts, or blue jeans—she called them "harlots" and "Jezebels."

One afternoon, while observing Cindy's performance, a fellow said to his friend, Steve May, "I wish I had the courage to stand up for the truth like she does."

And Steve said, "Are you serious?" No one is really taking her seriously are they? I agree that she has courage. Whether or not she's standing up for the truth is another question. Standing up for truth, defending the faith, and sharing Jesus with others is not about getting in someone's face and calling them names."

Of course, we know that. No one here aspires to be the next "Sister Cindy." But she's an extreme example of something we need to watch out for when we witness.

This is the final week of our four week series on evangelism and hospitality." You might call it more simply a lesson in "How to Share Your Faith." And we've been looking at one verse—1 Peter 3:15—because it gives us a simple and effective strategy for sharing our faith. The text again is this"

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...

First talked about the phrase "**Be prepared.**" Remember? 1) know what you believe, 2) know your testimony (practice what you would say if given the chance), and 3) know that God will give you a chance to share your faith with others – when you are ready, the opportunities to tell your story will open up for you if you watch for them.

Then we talked about the phrase "**Give an answer to everyone who asks.**" This means that 1) you make an effort to talk to those who display an interest, 2) you make sure it's a dialogue, not a monologue (listening to the other person, allowing them to ask questions, etc), and 3) always look for ways to nudge the door open a little further – give people clues to the fact that you are available to talk about faith, you are a believer in God, you worship at a church.

Today, we'll look at the last part of this verse, where Peter says, "**But do this with gentleness and respect.**" When we share our faith with someone—whether it's a total stranger, or your children, or your spouse, or your neighbor, or co-worker, or anyone else—we're to approach the task with gentleness and respect.

Steve May, the evangelist, whose work we have been considering in this series, goes so far as to suggest that this is a command from God's Word, as binding as all the other commandments, including "Do not lie" and "Do not steal." I love what he says about this and I think it applies whether we're sharing our faith story or a seat on the bus...: "Do this with gentleness and respect for... "We break God's law when we treat people condescendingly. And we break God's heart, too, because that's not how God wants us to represent God."

So, today, we'll look at three ways we can show gentleness and respect to others when you talk about Jesus and your faith and your church. First of all...

1. Respect their need to hear the empowering truth.

We need to tell people the whole story, the whole gospel, the whole truth, the empowering truth.

Imagine if you met someone in the coffee shop who is lonely and in need of a friend and feeling like the weight of the world is on her shoulders, and you say to her, "Have you heard the good news about Hope Church?" and they say "No, what is the good news about Hope Church." You stop for a moment, and say, "Well, Hope just moved to Jamaica Plain... Oh, and we could really use some help to organize the yard sale next week to get rid of the junk that we cleaned out in the move."

This is the truth, but it is not the whole truth, and certainly not the part of the story that will empower that person to take a step toward trying out the church or finding the kind of faith that will change their loneliness and pain.

Think about it, suppose I had a cure for baldness. Looking at my husband, it is obvious that I do not, but let's pretend that I do. If I were to approach a bald-headed man, and say to him, "Do you know your problem is? You're bald!" Would that help him? No. I could even go into great detail about it: "You're bald, because you have no hair! Your hair has all fallen out. Your head looks like a cue ball. You may try to fool others when you cover your baldness with a hat, but you're not fooling God. God sees what's underneath your hat."

Everything I have said so far is the truth, but it's not the empowering truth. If that was the extent of my message, no one would get cured of baldness.

The empowering truth in this scenario would be to say, "Sir, I have good news for you. You don't have to be bald-headed any more. If you sprinkle this powder on your head, you will grow hair. I was bald at one time, too, but now you can see that I have a full head of hair. It's worked for me, it's worked for thousands of others, and it will work for you, too. I'm holding in my hand the cure. All you have to do is reach out and take it—and your life will never be the same."

That's what it means to share the empowering truth. That's what it means to share the good news. You're not just expounding on the brokenness and sin in someone's life; You're showing them the way to a new life.

Sometimes parents make this mistake with their children—even when their children are adults. May tells the story of a friend of his, whose 24-year-old son came to him for help. The dad—his name is Bill—outlined for his son all the things he is doing wrong. He's promiscuous and hurtful in relationships. He's drinking to excess. He's spending money foolishly. And all of these sins are leading the young man down a path to certain misery. In fact, he's already there; the kid is as miserable as he can be.

As May sat in Bill's office, listening to him scold his son over the phone, he kept hoping that Bill offer his son what he most needed to hear. I hoped he would say, "Son, you don't have to live like this. There's a better way. You need a life changing experience with faith. If you let Jesus come into your life and change your heart, you won't keep getting into these messes. Turn from your brokenness, and put your faith in God." May hoped Bill would say this, but Bill (who's a minister) never told his son the empowering truth. He just revisited the list of his son's troubles and brokenness.

When we witness to others, we need to tell them the whole truth, the empowering truth. And for every minute you spend talking about the brokenness that creates a need for God, spend 5 minutes talking about God's powerful, life-changing grace—because God grace is greater than our sin. We need to offer people the solutions, a faith community that will love and care for them and teach them about faith, a relationship with a

power that will change them and release them, the Love of Jesus for all of God's creation, the amazing grace of God; these are the transformative messages that people need to hear. And we need to respect their need to hear the whole story, the empowering truth of the gospel. Secondly, when you share your faith with others...

2. Respect their right to think about their decision carefully.

Sometimes, when we talk about faith or our church with people, when we talk about the solutions we have discovered to life's weighty challenges, when we share good news with others, we want people to respond to us right now! Right this instant! Right?

Because you know they will benefit so greatly, because you believe that need it, now . You don't want them to waste another minute of their life without faith and a community in which to practice that faith.

Even though we know how much better our lives are with these things, we can't pressure anyone to make a decision until they're absolutely ready. We have to give them time to think about it. If a person has been living without God for 10, 25, or 50 years, we can't expect them to make a monumental, life-altering decision just a few minutes after we start talking to them, anymore than they would decide to buy a house after taking a quick glance at the front yard. They need time. They need to think about it. They need to investigate the faith a little further, to make sure Christianity isn't based on a bunch of fairy tales. And we need to respect their right to consider the decision carefully.

Many evangelism programs are really nothing more than salesmanship courses teaching people to persuade a prospect to make a decision RIGHT NOW. That's not what witnessing really is. When you share your faith, your job is not to try to persuade a reluctant prospect to make a decision he or she isn't ready to make. The Holy Spirit is at work in that person's life, drawing him or her to God. You don't have to push any one along; the Holy Spirit will continue to work in their life.

Some evangelism approaches teach "techniques", tricks, really to get a person into a frame of mind in which they were ready to "buy"...: like getting people in the habit of agreeing with you, and "assuming the sale" by giving them two different options for saying yes to accepting Christ. For example, if we were standing in the park, I might say, "Shall we pray right here for you to accept Christ as your Savior, or would you feel more comfortable if we prayed together on that park bench?"

In the sales business, that's what is called a "hard sell." Friends, the hard sell has no place in evangelism. A person needs to make this decision on their own, in their own time, without being pressured by anyone else.

One of the greatest evangelists of our time, Megachurch pastor Rick Warren uses the example: What if you went to a restaurant and the waiter stood at your table demanding that you order steak. "You must have steak, and you must have it right now. Today is the day of steak! If you don't have steak today, you might never get another chance to have steak again!" Would you trust a waiter who tried to pressure you into having steak? No, of course not. You want time to look at the menu and make your own choice.

We don't want to try to pressure anyone into making a decision before they've had a chance to look us over. Following Jesus is a lifelong commitment. A person needs time to consider it before they make a decision. After all, you didn't marry your spouse the first day you met, did you?

When you share your faith, respect the person's right to think about their decision. Thirdly...

3. Respect people's responsibility to choose for themselves.

I have many close friends and two siblings (along with their children), who are not people of faith. I wish somehow I could change that, I wish I could make that decision for them, because if I could, I would open a door that would change their lives forever. But they have chosen a different path than I.

There's a point in time when a person crosses the line between thoughtful consideration of faith, and deliberate rejection. The responsibility of that decision doesn't rest on you and me. It rests on that person, and that person alone.

In some Evangelical (with an uppercase E) circles, there is a pretty manipulative theme adrift that if you have found faith and someone you know and love does not find Christ, “It’s all your fault!”

But let me make this clear. While it is absolutely essential that we share our faith with others—I want you to understand that our responsibly ends with the steady, recurring, loving, gentle and respectful sharing. If a person ultimately rejects the message, if a person chooses a life without God and faith, if a person chooses to deny the gospel message of a life of grace and chose instead to live for themselves, that person cannot blame their roommate, or their neighbor, or the children, or their parents, or their pastor, or the nun who whacked their hands with a ruler in parochial school, or anyone else for their dilemma. They made a decision, and they are responsible for it. That goes for you, me, your children, my children, your parents, my parents, and everyone else.

So, when you share your faith with someone, remember that the decision they make ultimately rests with them. We don’t share our faith just so we can absolve ourselves from potential feelings of remorse in the afterlife. We share our faith for one reason: because God has changed our lives and we cannot keep it to ourselves.

You’ve know someone in your life who, when they first become a parent, can work their bundle of joy into every conversation. She can’t stop talking about her child. Any parent (and many aunts, uncles, and grandparents) can relate to this.. That’s because becoming a parent changes your life forever. It fills you with joy, and happiness, and excitement, and hope, and you simply can’t help yourself—you’ll talk about your kids, you’ll show everyone their pictures, and, if you can get your friends to sit still long enough, you’ll show them hours of home movies. New parents are so enthusiastic about their children. They act like their kids are the first kids who ever walked or said, “Dada.” And their excitement is so overwhelming they just can’t be quiet about it. That’s the way it is when we share our faith.

Our goal in sharing our faith is not to “close the deal,” so to speak—though sometimes we have the opportunity to do just that. But our goal in sharing our faith with others is to let the Holy Spirit use us in drawing that person one step closer to knowing Jesus.

Friends, I want to be part of that process as often as I can. Not because I’m afraid that God will be mad at me if I don’t, but because there is no greater joy than to see someone find a faith home, or find a glimmer of hope, or come in to a personal relationship with God .

CONCLUSION

Sharing our faith is such a privilege. It is amazing that God is able to use our stories to help lead people to turn away from self and turn toward God. But then, all things are possible with God. I don’t know about you, but I am humbled when the opportunity presents itself.

Peter told us to share our faith with gentleness and respect. That means that we don’t treat the person we’re talking to as just another prospect, just another notch in our John 3:16 belt. We need to view them as God views them—as someone God loves and is trying to lead home. That means that we must respect their need to hear the empowering truth; we must respect their right to consider their decision carefully; we must respect their responsibility to make their decision on their own.

Beloved, we’ve talked a while about “How to Share Your Faith.” We’ve seen that it is not nearly as intimidating as it might first appear. And we have focused on it because it is just part of what we must do as people of faith. Yes, I said must – we must because it is such a blessing, it is so transformative, it is so important, that we cannot keep it to ourselves. It is in my book one of the ways that we follow the two most important commandments. It is one of the ways that we love God and love our neighbors by sharing our faith in a way that invites them to have the same amazing grace.

You don’t have to memorize a sales pitch. You only have to be willing to tell your story to others. Tell them what God has done for you. And tell them what God can do for them.

- Tell them about the love and care you experience here,
- Tell them about the world changing social justice actions we take here at Hope;

- and the life changing, one person at a time serving ministries in which we engage here at Hope
- Tell them about the empowering, moving worship and music at Hope, and
- the social groups and the study groups and the spiritual ministries of your church; and
- Tell them what all of that has done for you. Then tell them about what Hope Church might do for them.

And if you are able, offer them Jesus. Tell them about the life transforming grace of the Holy Spirit in your life. That my friends is what it means to do evangelism (with a lower case e). That is what it means to share your faith. I pray that you will find within you the courage to tell your story and bring a friend to church.

To that end, I would like to invite Jean Vandergrift to share with you an opportunity to learn more about telling your story!

Resources: Steve May, www.PreachingTodaySermons.com, A resource of Christianity Today International