

Epiphany 7 2019
World Mission Sunday
Rev. Doug Floyd
Isaiah 61:1-4, Psalm 96, Romans 10:9-17, John 20:19-31

Almighty God, through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, you revealed the way of eternal life to every race and nation: Pour out this gift anew, that by the preaching of the Gospel your salvation may reach to the ends of the earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

At the end of his telling of the Gospel story, John writes, “Jesus provided far more God-revealing signs than are written down in this book. These are written down so you will believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and in the act of believing, have real and eternal life in the way he personally revealed it.” (John 20:31). John is proclaiming the Good News by telling stories of Jesus. Throughout his Gospel, John also highlights how Jesus is the fulfillment of Jewish festivals and Jewish structures like the Temple. In other words, his telling of the Good News is rooted in ancient Israel even as it is focused upon the work of Jesus.

What does it mean to proclaim the Good News? How do we proclaim the Good News?

I grew up in churches where the call to soul-winning dominated our focus. As teenager, I remember going out into the community, knocking on doors of strangers, and trying to tell this Good News. When they opened the door we would say, “Hi, we are taking a survey of the people in this community about religious beliefs and practices.” First off, this was a lie because we were not actually collecting these supposed surveys or even filling them out. This was only a chance to ask the key question, “If you died today, where would you go?” And the follow up, “Why should God allow you into heaven?”

Our Good News was based on fake survey and the message we shared emphasized the death of the person we encountered. As I look back at those days, I am puzzled by how that could be good news. The impending rapture was also a key for sharing the Good News because people had to accept Jesus or face the coming horrors on the planet that would be breaking out any moment.

Sometimes, I think the Good News has been hidden behind other political or social issues that have dominated our focus. Other times, I fear the language of the Good News has confused non-believers. In a landscape where Biblical literacy continues to fade, our Christian lingo is not always clear.

As we live in a culture that is rapidly becoming less fluent in the Biblical story, how to we share the Good News? I talk to many Christians on a regular basis who only read select passages of the New Testament and have a strong distaste for the Old Testament. Eugene Peterson realized this challenge while serving as a pastor of Bel Air Presbyterian. His translation of *The Message*, was the fruit of this challenge. He writes about shifting from being a professor of Biblical languages to entering the local church,

“I was now plunged into quite a different world. The first noticeable difference was that nobody seemed to care much about the Bible, which so recently people had been paying me to teach

them. Many of the people I worked with now knew virtually nothing about it, had never read it, and weren't interested in learning. Many others had spent years reading it but for them it had gone flat through familiarity, reduced to clichés. Bored, they dropped it. And there weren't many people in between. Very few were interested in what I considered my primary work, getting the words of the Bible into their heads and hearts, getting the message lived. They found newspapers and magazines, videos and pulp fiction more to their taste.”¹

For 30 years, he labored to put the language of Scripture into the words of the people, so they could begin to hear how it echoes a message relevant in our day and time. Bob Ekblad shares a similar experience in bringing the Gospel into the lives of prisoners. He writes,

“Many people have experienced the Bible as a weapon used against them by people in power—parents, teachers, missionaries, employers, and even judges and government officials. In Spanish the word sermon is synonymous for a scolding. In rural Central America, la biblia is a Spanish slang term for machete which peasants carry unsheathed as both a weapon for self-defense and a tool. Many people avoid reading the Bible because they are afraid they will discover God's charges against them along with God's sentence for sin they have committed.”²

We live in a time when many people in and out of the church, do not know the message of Scripture let alone the word of Good News. At the same time, there is a growing reluctance to share this good news. A recent Barna survey suggested that many Christians feel “it is wrong to share one's personal beliefs with someone of a different faith in hopes that they will one day share the same faith.”³

Like many other Christians, I've been compelled to quote the famous phrase attributed to St. Francis, “share the Gospel and when necessary use words.” Unfortunately, this often amounts to not sharing anything about the Gospel with anyone.

John writes his Gospel because he is compelled to share the Good News of Jesus Christ so that people will believe and have real and eternal life in the way he personally revealed it. When Jesus speaks the word of life to the woman at the well, she runs away. She runs away to her village and repeats the Good News and soon returns with a crowd of people eager to hear the Good News.

Today as we celebrate World Mission Sunday, I want to consider how our mission to the world begins in this community, in our workplace, in our families, and in the people we meet around us. Just as Jesus told the disciples in that “repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem”⁴ we hear the call to proclaim the word of forgiveness to all nations, beginning in Maryville, in Blount County, in Knox County, and beyond.

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2005).

² Bob Ekblad, *Guerrilla Gospel: Reading the Bible for Liberation in the Power of the Spirit* (The People's Seminary Press, 2018), p. 7.

³ Barna Report. Reviving Evangelism (The Barna Group, 2019), p. 10.

⁴ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Lk 24:47.

Now I return to my earlier question, “How do we proclaim the Good News?” Just as I shared last week, I believe the Gospel must take shape in our lives, in our deeds. We bear the Gospel every day. But we still must speak. Just as Paul reminds us in our passage from Romans today, “faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.”

As I was reflecting on proclaiming the Good News, I looked back through the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles, and here are a few things that stood out. I don’t consider this a comprehensive list, but it does include some observable patterns in the life of Jesus and his Apostles.

Prayer
Hospitality
Listening
Storytelling

The Gospels and the Acts are filled with stories of Jesus and the Apostles praying. Jesus regularly goes away for prayer. The early church community is praying. As a priestly people, we must pray for God’s Spirit upon us, but also for our community and the people around us. We have a pattern of praying for the sick, but it might also be good to regularly begin to pray for friends and acquaintances who do not know Jesus.

Years ago, when Kelly and I attended a conference on house church put on by a mega house church. Sounds strange but it started out as a house church but as the group grew they decided that people would join house groups not the larger church. At the time we met them, there were over two thousand people that met in houses and gathered on Sundays. The people in each house group regularly prayed for friends or people they met during the week.

One gentleman told the story of meeting a goth girl who worked at the gas station. He would speak to her from time to time and asked the group to pray for her. Eventually, he invited her to a cookout the group had. She came. She enjoyed it and came some more. Over time, she became a Christian and eventually moved overseas as a missionary. We must never treat lightly the power of praying for the people around us.

There is also a pattern of hospitality. This is a larger word for a series of smaller actions in the Gospels and the Acts they are welcoming the stranger. Jesus engages the woman at the well. He and the disciples go to the parties of saints and sinners. They participate in the life of the people around them. A recent study I read indicated that Christians tend to have a less diverse circle of friends than other groups or even religions. Personally, I’ll admit that when I was in the corporate world, I was in regular conversations with people from all backgrounds and nations. I don’t really have that same reach anymore.

I teach on Thursdays partly to stay connected with a younger generation. I would pray that we all might find ways of opening up our lives and relations into the lives of other people. This idea of hospitality takes shapes in all sorts of ways from sharing meals to serving to simply listening.

Listening to people and their world is a regular pattern in the life of Jesus and the disciples. When he engages with the woman at the well, he listens to her. He engages on the issues she

wants to talk about even as he speaks truth in the midst. As Paul takes the Gospel beyond the Jewish synagogues to the Gentile world, he expresses familiarity with their culture, their writers, and their monuments. He is listening to their world.

As our culture continue to shift both in multiculturally and spiritually, it is vital that we learn a posture of listening. As we listen to others, we are also listening to the Spirit. In the moment, we may not sense him speaking to us, but in retrospect, we may have a sense that he is stirring us and guide us so that we will be prepared to speak in the right moment.

In the Gospels, we see casual contact between Jesus and people as well as moments when he addresses the larger crowds. We see the same pattern with the disciples. Whether speaking to the crowd or the individual, both Jesus and the disciples often recount stories directly from Scripture or parables that allude to Biblical imagery. They don't have a memorized script but appear to share the appropriate stories and allusions in the moment. As they tell the stories, they include themselves in the story and even the listeners are being weaved into the stories.

They are drawing upon the inspired words handed down across generations. Dorothy Sayers suggests that a writer imparts something of spirit or energy into the work and characters he is writing. When others read the work, they may actually experience the same energy or vitality that the original writer imparted in the creation.⁵ This gives us some sense of the power of general inspiration but also of the inspired Word of God.

Thomas Cranmer believed the Holy Spirit was actively working in the listener in the reading and hearing of Scripture. He writes, "The words of Holy Scripture be called words of everlasting life: for they be God's instrument, ordained for the same purpose. They have power to convert through God's promise, and they be effectual through God's assistance; and, being received in a faithful heart, they have ever a heavenly spiritual working in them."⁶

If we follow the pattern of Jesus and the disciples, we share our story as part of a larger story, the Biblical story of God's grace. Last week, I suggested that we might read the Exodus story in terms of God's Rescue, God's Instruction and God's Promise. We might reflect on stories like the Exodus, Abraham, David, even Jonah and how these stories speak to the rhythms of God's grace in our own lives. When Bob Ekblad teaches in prisons, the inmates are often shocked by the lives of the judges and the kings. This give Bob an opportunity to talk about how God takes the rough and broken people and still uses them in his great plan of salvation.

I pray that we would be a people who truly bear witness to the Jesus Christ as the saving hope for the world. That our lives might reflect his beauty even as our words might tell his story to people we have love and will continue to love whether they receive our words or not.

⁵ Dorothy Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker*, (Reading Essentials, 1941), see chapter 4 ("The Energy Revealed in Creation").

⁶ See Ashley Null, "Thomas Cranmer and the Lively Word" < <https://www.virtueonline.org/thomas-cranmer-and-lively-word-ashley-null>>.