

“How-to’s of Covenant Life: Witness – Tell about God”

October 5, 2014 – World Communion Sunday

Fall series

It happened to me in a Meijer parking lot. I had been in and out of the store a couple of times and had seen a couple sitting in their van near mine. The woman smiled each time I looked her way. Finally, as I was putting groceries in the back of my van, she approached me and asked me point blank: do you know Jesus?

I’ll confess that I was a bit startled by her question - not offended - just surprised that she would approach me in a parking lot. I told her that I did believe in Jesus and that I was a pastor in the area. She said that the Holy Spirit nudged her to talk to me. She had just come from worship. Sometimes, she said, she was drawn to talk to a fellow believer, and she offered her encouragement. Sometimes it was an opportunity to share her faith with someone who was searching. It was a pleasant conversation - not one that I have every day. But obviously, I remember it. It stuck with me.

Like I said, I wasn’t offended - just surprised. And the more I thought about it, I was touched by what this woman had done. She had taken a step of faith - a risk - to come and talk to me. I might not share my faith in the same way, but her act was a challenge to me. What does my Christian witness look like? What was I willing to do to share my faith?

If you’ve been connected to the United Methodist Church for a long time, you might notice that “witness” is new to our membership vows. It was added in 2008 as a reminder that the church doesn’t exist just for us, but that we’re called to be witnesses. John and Charles Wesley, founders of the movement that grew into Methodism, were committed to outreach. The term “Methodist” comes from their intentional time with other believers. They had a method to their study of Scripture. They made a point to meet together and share with each other. They were accountable to each other. They encouraged one another to talk about their faith and reach others with the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Jesus’ last words before he ascended into heaven were to make disciples - not to keep the Good News inside the church where we’re comfortable, but to share it wherever we are. We share it locally, nationally, globally. Missions is vital to who we are in Christ.

Jesus told his disciples that they would be witnesses - that they would tell about what they had heard and seen. We tell about God’s continuing work in our lives and in the world. And sometimes it means telling about those things we struggle with or the things we’re not proud of. How can we be effective witnesses to Jesus Christ’s love if we don’t share the reasons we stand in need of it?

How would you complete this sentence: “I need Jesus because...” Can you explain why you believe what you believe? Only you have your personal experience, and it’s uniquely yours and uniquely powerful. Your witness has the power to bless someone. I can’t count the number of times I’ve been blessed by someone’s deep faith when they face hard times. It matters to me. It affirms that God is at work and that faith matters.

Witness is vital and needed. We cannot expect that people will just come in to church. There were seasons of time when that was the case, but not now. Our actions are just as powerful as words when it comes to sharing our faith. However, we don’t always take those steps - sometimes those risks - to be witnesses of Jesus Christ in word and action.

Sometimes we don't do much at all outside of coming to church. It's said that there are two things you shouldn't talk about: politics and religion. I think we do a much better job about politics than religion. We've been conditioned or told to hide our faith - that it should be private matter. It is personal, but not private. Our faith affects all of life. Jesus didn't hide who he was or what he believed. He talked to people. He sat with people. He ate with people. He spent time with people. He related to people.

This letter we call First Peter came to new Christians scattered around Asia Minor in the middle of the first century AD. They faced great suffering for their faith on many fronts – home and family, community, and culture. And suffering becomes a theme - particularly how this community of Christians will live in the midst of suffering.

I've always been drawn to this passage, especially verse 15: *But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. 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 heard it from *The Message*: *Through thick and thin, keep your hearts at attention, in adoration before Christ, your Master. Be ready to speak up and tell anyone who asks why you're living the way you are, and always with the utmost courtesy.*

We get scared when we hear the word "evangelism," but each of us has the calling to share Good News. Yet, we've become so afraid of offending someone that we don't do anything. We don't offer to pray for people. We don't offer to talk about how faith might make a difference. We don't walk with people and receive their questions. We don't have to have a deep theological reason, but we can have deep conversations with people about things that matter. Our job is not to save people - God does that work, but how can God do God's work without us?

Someone told me a story of a co-worker who took an opportunity to share his faith over dinner on a business trip. It was a simple, but memorable moment. He said that God's grace is a free gift. Why wouldn't you take it? Why would you refuse it if it's for you? It's not complicated. It's for you. Our words don't have to be big. Our words need to be sincere. We need to speak from what we know. We need to tell our story of Jesus and his love. People need to hear how you've been through tough times - and how faith in God helps you get through it - maybe not over it - but through it.

We have to just as passionate about growing in faith ourselves as we are about seeing others claim faith and grow in faith. Staying connected to Scripture is important to our witness. Christian education is important to our witness. Connecting with others and hearing how God is moving in their lives helps us to look at our lives and see what God is up to. Whether you're someone who finds joy in talking about faith matters or someone who finds joy in serving others at Supper House, nurturing our own spiritual lives is vital. We have to be committed to growing in grace and holiness. How can be faithful witnesses if we're not learning and growing? Do we figure that there's no more to learn about God and faith and life?

We have to be able to tell others why we have hope. Yes, it's the promise of eternal life - that this earthly life is not the end - that God exists and His love is real. But it's more than just what we're looking forward to. How does the love and grace of God make a difference to you right now? How does it affect every day? How does it look when we face difficult times? How do we still praise even

when life looks bleak? Are we prepared? How do we know what to say and how to say it? What doors has God opened for you? How is God calling you to be a witness? Who needs to hear from you about Jesus and his love?

When we celebrate Holy Communion, we pray that God would help us become one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world. We offer new life to others when we love as Jesus loves. Who has been that witness of God's grace to you? Who has shared their story of Jesus and his love in a way that gave you hope? How will you do that for someone else?

Coming to the table is an act of worship, and it's also an act of witness. We need to come here because we need to be forgiven and made new. We need to be fed and strengthened by grace that only comes from God so that we can show and tell the world that God's love is real.

Thanks be to God. Amen!