

“Know Your Story – and Tell It!”

September 27, 2015

The “E” Word: Evangelism Means Sharing Good News series

So, how many of us have thought and prayed about friends, relatives, acquaintances, and neighbors we might invite to worship with us - next Sunday or any other Sunday? Today you’ll see a FRAN card in your bulletin one last time for this series, but please know that we’ll do this again.

Our invitation needs to be personal - face to face as much as possible, specific - with a date and time, and relational - making sure we’ve going to be there, too. So, let’s take a moment to pray for people we’ve named, for help and guidance as we invite, and to remember that relationships matter.

As we reclaim evangelism for what it is - sharing good news - remember that we’ve talked about the importance of invitation - of saying “come and see” to those who may not have a church home.

And there are many without a church home. 100 years ago, roughly 80% of people had a connection to church and attended regularly. Today “regular” attendance now is 1 out of 6 Sundays, which works out to roughly 22 times per year (or less than half). Again, this isn’t a judgment; it’s reality. Right now, just 1 out of 5 (20%) of people under 40 regularly participate in a church. And if you go down to age 25, it’s just 1 out of 10 (10%).

Last week we touched on how we might think about and actually write out even two sentences if someone asks why we go to church. A few of you shared them with me, and with your permission I share them today:

I attend and love church for many reasons. The main reasons are to help me grow in my love, faith and trust in God. I love singing music that helps me connect with Him, and I love to worship Him surrounded by our wonderful Lake Harbor family. I'm also uplifted and feel close to Him by praying in a group and I get those opportunities at Lake Harbor. I practice my faith because I can't imagine trying to live without it.

It's the opportunity to tell someone struggling in any way how the Lord has made you struggle and the outcome of his trial on you. I use this at work when someone is telling me how difficult their life is. Most often they are using their time trying to get out of it on their own. They talk about how many times they have tried and failed but there is always one underlying factor missing, they

haven't requested his presence to be part of the solution. That's all it takes is a door cracked to let a light in.

I come to church with joyful expectations... due to a deep appreciation of our God who provided me with a better path in life after I had chosen so many wrong ones on my own. Because of His love, forgiveness, and ever-presence at my side, I can focus on His plan for my life. Thanks be TOTALLY to God.

And this person added a quote from Mark Twain:

"The two most important days in your life are the day you are born, and the day you find out why."

Isn't that powerful? Just a few sentences can tell the power of God at work in our lives! That's what Paul offers in his words to the Galatians. He tells them how it was before, what God did in his life, and how his life is different because of God. And he's clear to give God glory for it. He didn't do it on his own. He did it with God's help!

My story isn't so dramatic like Paul's story - maybe yours isn't either, but it doesn't have to be. Sharing our story is ultimately sharing who we are, where we've been, and where we're going with God's help.

One lesson we learn from Paul is that we don't leave out the bad parts! Maybe that sounds strange, but there's something incredibly powerful about sharing our struggles, too. Paul put it all out there. He didn't cover up the bad parts. He was authentic and honest about who he was and how amazing God's grace was in his life. He showed how he was a persecutor of Jesus and how he became a proclaimer of Jesus.

We're called to point others to God, to share the blessings of the Kingdom of God, and to do it authentically. Madeleine L'Engle says, "We do not draw people to Christ by loudly discrediting what they believe, by telling them how wrong they are and how right we are, but by showing them a light that is so lively that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it."

I thought of that this week as I saw my grandma. She fell on Monday and broke her leg. She's 93 and had surgery. It's been a tough week for her and for my mom and aunt, too. I visited Grandma, and I realized that she's shared her faith in many ways over many years. As we talked, she was quick to bring God into view. She told me clearly how she trusted God and always has. And when I read Psalm 121, "I lift up my eyes to the hills...where does my help come from...my help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth..." she said, "Isn't that great?"

Friends, we're not just members of a church. We don't just go to Lake Harbor. We're called to be missionaries - those who are sent out in the name of Jesus Christ. And that means that we share our faith with each other. That begins in our homes and in our families. Sunday morning worship and study is vital, but so is our conversation outside of Sunday morning. How many of us talk about God and faith around the dinner table or in other moments when we can?

When we gather with each other here, we share our faith so that all of us grow deeper in love with God. We share our faith so that we can be ready to share it with others in a way that's invitational and authentic. It's not just about our understanding of God, but it's also about our experience of God. It's the head and the heart together.

In our faith family history, sharing the experience of God was vital to the Methodist movement. Those small groups who gathered would ask, "How is it with your soul? How have you experienced God in your life?" That's a very different question than "How are you?" It offers us an opportunity to go deeper and to share about God's work in our lives.

And when we know our story and tell it, something happens! It's almost like our lives are reoriented around God's grace, and our own faith is stronger. Our story can help others go deeper in their faith - and it may even be a catalyst for someone to come to faith in Christ. God does the work to bring people to Christ, but our stories can be a powerful help. And when we share, our story spills over into our relationship and becomes more of who we are.

There's another letter that's credited to Paul - Philemon. Short and sweet, but it has encouragement for us:

⁴Every time your name comes up in my prayers, I say, "Oh, thank you, God!" ⁵I keep hearing of the love and faith you have for the Master Jesus, which brims over to other Christians. ⁶And I keep praying that this faith we hold in common keeps showing up in the good things we do, and that people recognize Christ in all of it.

Paul's story is powerful because of God's grace. He reminds us that God's love is over the top amazing and radical. God accepts everyone - even the one who was the worst persecutor of Christ! God works through all kinds of people - and God works through you and me!

Today you received another tool for evangelism. These are ten ideas for the workplace, but they can apply to you whether you work outside of your home or not. All of us can do them - from taking time to pray before we start the day to praying before we eat. And I especially like the suggestion when someone asks what you did

over the weekend, you tell them that you went to church. Maybe that would start a conversation! We also have more business cards where you can write your name and phone number on the back as you invite.

When we have good news to share, isn't it easy to pass it on? How quick we are to share it on Facebook or text or call someone! Friends, we have the best good news: God is real and God cares. I experienced that as I sat next to my grandma in the hospital this week. Maybe some of us saw God at work during Pope Francis' visit. God loves us and the whole world. God wants to be our strength and our help. God offers us life that truly is abundant. And God uses us to share faith, hope, and love.

Remember our challenge from Jesus is true: there are many who could be invited, but not enough people inviting them. "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few."

We must meet people where they are - not where we are. We must know our story and tell it so that people know the power of God in the world.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.