

“The Things We Have Heard and Known”
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Psalm 78:1-4 Matthew 21:28-32

When I was growing up in the late ‘60’s, I drifted away from my hippie friends, and I became a teenage Jesus freak. Both the hippies and Jesus freaks were counter-cultural and idealistic, but the Christians had something my hippie friends seemed to be lacking: a spiritual passion and connection to a larger reality that was higher and deeper than any social movement or political system. I had been raised in the Presbyterian church, but not much of it got through to me. I was bored in worship and slept through my confirmation class. But then I met some Christians who were part of a charismatic house church, and I jumped in and immersed myself in their community. I was thirsting for a spiritual connection and sense of meaning, and I found it there. I took everything in, including their emphasis on witnessing and sharing God’s word with people outside the faith.

I was particularly concerned about my own family. My father was a good and upright man, but he claimed to be an agnostic. He only attended church on Christmas and Easter to make my mother happy. And my older sister rejected religion outright. I was worried that if they didn’t convert to Christianity, when they died they would go to hell. I’m not sure this was an actual teaching of the house church. But it seemed to be taken for granted that the reason you share your faith is to save a person’s soul. So I prayed for my family and took every opportunity to engage them in discussions about God and Jesus, in the hope that they would see the light and be saved. Later my father did have a change of heart, but probably not because of my efforts as an evangelist.

Most liberal Presbyterians today don’t believe God will send people to hell if they don’t convert to Christianity before they die. And most of us would rather die than speak about our faith. Evangelism is one of the least favorite subjects of Presbyterians, right at the bottom of the list with stewardship. But stewardship is different. When we talk about stewardship in the Presbyterian Church, we actually expect you to do something about it. We try not to be pushy, but there is some peer pressure to give money, even if you can only afford one dollar. Everyone knows that giving is part of our life together. Not so with evangelism. In most Presbyterian churches, no one really expects anyone to go out there and practice what the pastor preaches. We allow our pastors to talk about the subject. But that will be enough. We’d rather organize a potluck instead.

Still, our national church is urging us to take evangelism more seriously. So this Sunday has been named “Evangelism Sunday” in the Presbyterian Church. And here we are. Why would anyone bother to talk about their faith with others, besides the fear of hell?

Well first of all, it is a major theme of scripture. So if scripture plays any role in our faith, we will have to deal with it somehow. Jack read from Psalm 78 this morning, “Listen to my teaching... I will open my mouth (with) things we have heard and known, that our ancestors have told us. We will not hide them from our children. We will tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that God has done.”

The first and easiest form of evangelism is to teach our own children, who are hopefully the next generation of Christians. But it's not enough just to pass on the stories and traditions of the past. We also need to share our own faith with them, and model for them a life of prayer and service. If we can do this, our children will sense that something real is happening here, because they can see the effect it has on the adults. If they don't sense anything real happening, why would they want to come here, besides to hang out with their friends?

Most churches at least make an effort with their own children. That's basic. And in this church we are blessed with a great group of Sunday School teachers. But our responsibility doesn't stop there. These days there's a whole generation of people who were raised with little or no religion. Or they have been turned off by bad teaching and preaching or by other problems in the church. If we truly love our neighbors, we will want to share the inspiration, strength and love we have found in God. The point is not to convert people, or get them to join our church. Our church is not for everyone. But everyone needs God. And Jesus Christ lived and died on this earth to bring us to God.

When Jesus was about to leave this earth, he told his disciples, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations..." (Matt. 28:19). He also told them, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem (that is, in their city),... (in the surrounding country), and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8). This is a major responsibility for us as Christians, to bear witness to the wonders of God, and to tell the world about Jesus Christ. It's true that some people experience the wonders of God apart from Jesus Christ, and there's no need to prove them right or wrong. Our job as Christians is to carry a message of love from God to the world. And we are called to find ways to deliver that message, and encourage people to respond with faith.

I Peter 3:15 says, "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you." Are you always ready to talk about why you hope in God? It's not about arguing people into the kingdom. It's about sharing our experiences, telling others what we have seen and heard. Why do you go to church? Is there more to it than simply finding friends? If so, what? If you go to be inspired, what is inspiring to you? And what are you inspired to do? Why do you pay attention to Jesus? And don't just say, "Because he's the Son of God," because that doesn't make sense to someone who is not a Christian. What about Jesus attracts you? Which of his teachings has influenced you? How has following his way affected your life? What difference does it make to be with other people who follow him? We want to keep the issue of spirituality alive out there. We want to share our joys and our source of hope and strength. We are called to bless the world, to be there for others and bring good news and the love of God to people and places outside of the church.

Pete read the story of the man with two sons this morning. The man told the first son to go work in the vineyard, and the son refused. But later the son changed his mind and went. When the father told the second son to work in the vineyard, he said, "Sure," which probably pleased the father greatly. But that son never went. We know which one did the right thing.

Maybe it's better to say no at first, but also to think about it, and pray about it. Because when we think and pray about something, we often end up doing the right thing in spite of ourselves. If we agree to do something without thinking, we may end up like

the second son, looking like we are doing the right thing, when really we are doing nothing.

One of the things I like about the parable of the two sons is that the first son, who originally said no, felt free to change his mind. A refusal or rejection does not have to be permanent. Whatever is going on in our lives that doesn't want to respond to God, is not necessarily the end of the story. We always have the chance to come back do what is right.

And what does God ask us to do anyway? What does it mean to work in the vineyard? It's not as though God is calling us to a life of endless drudgery. And I don't imagine God wants us to make spectacles of ourselves by standing on street corners and shouting a message. People don't want to be lectured with religious jargon. Who understands it anyway?

At our last Presbytery meeting we heard about a group from the United Presbyterian Church in Paterson who have an interesting new outreach effort in their neighborhood. The church members are mostly middle class, but in the neighborhood there is lots of poverty and crime. One particular block right near the church is where prostitutes hang out. Several women in the church started something they call "A Wing and A Prayer." Every Thursday at 6 p.m., they put on T-shirts that say, "Faith Works" on one side, and on the other, "Don't just GO to church; BE the church." They set up a table and give out free chicken wings, and pray with anyone who wants to pray. And people are coming, up to 100 of them, first only for the chicken wings, but now also with all different kinds of prayer concerns. And a real community is forming out there on the sidewalk every week.

God calls us to join in the work God is doing in the world, to be where God is present, and do what we can to be part of it. How? Each person will do it in his or her own way, using his or her own personality and gifts. For some it will be serving up soup on Mondays, or teaching ESL classes. For some it will be visiting people in a nursing home. I could be part of a secular job: teaching, caring for the sick, reporting the news, inspecting buildings, doing what you do with excellence and sensitivity to the spirit. For others it might simply mean being present when someone is in need. The idea is to think "outward," to look outside the church, and look for opportunities to share the wonders of God we have heard and known, and bless the world with God's love.