

Witnessing Our Faith in a Secular Culture

Matthew 12:33-35

4th Sunday in Lent – March 2, 2008

A traveling evangelist arrived one afternoon in a small town where, that evening, he was to preach in a tent revival. Needing to mail a letter, he stopped a ten-year-old boy and asked where the post office was. The boy had to go over the directions several times before the evangelist understood, but finally he seemed to. He thanked the boy and then said, "If you'll come to the revival in the big gospel tent in the park tonight, I am going to tell everyone just how to get to heaven." "I don't think I'll be there," the boy said. "You don't even know how to get to the post office."

That is only one of hundreds of stories and cartoons about "evangelists." Sincere and dedicated, as no doubt many of them are, as the hard-sell salesmen of their particular religious beliefs and doctrines, they do become the butt of humor, not unlike the way door-to-door aluminum siding salesmen were the butt of jokes in times past.

They are, of course, only doing what they're convinced that the Bible tells them to do: that is, to proclaim to people that, whether they know it or not, their souls are in peril and need to be rescued from eternal damnation. This is accomplished, they claim, by believing correct beliefs about Jesus, God, the Bible, salvation, etc. If making that happen requires some brow-beating, some intrusiveness, some coercion, some frightening of us (supposedly lost souls) in order to prevent our landing in hell, so be it. Methods today might be a bit more sophisticated, but boorish tactics, nevertheless, are considered to be just fine if they do the job.

You might recall the Peanuts cartoon in which Lucy is pondering her own potential as an evangelist. She tells Linus: "I would make a great evangelist. Do you know the kid who sits behind me at school? I convinced him that my religion is better than his religion." "How did you do that?" Linus inquires. "I hit him on the head with my lunch box," she replies.

Perhaps a blow on the head with a lunch box makes sense as a form of communicating the Christian faith IF one is convinced that imposing beliefs, doctrines, and dogmas is the right way to witness to one's faith. Some of us, however, see that as distorting the whole matter of being a Christian. So I continue this series on "What does it mean to be a person of faith in a secular culture?"

Not infrequently I get phone calls from people who have just moved to the city and are looking for a church. Certain of them will start right off by asking whether we "preach the

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Gospel” here. To that I answer, “Tell me what you mean by that.” Their reply to my inquiry is typically irritated or condescending, something to the effect that I, a minister, certainly shouldn’t have to ask that question; that if I were a real minister I would know that to preach the Gospel is to proclaim that we are, by our very nature, damned to hell unless we are washed in the blood of Jesus and believe the five salvation beliefs without which we don’t get into heaven.

My reply is that that’s not the way my Bible reads and that, moreover, if I thought for a second that God were that merciless, arbitrary and narrow, I’d get into some other line of work tomorrow. That appalls the caller and the phone call tends to end abruptly.

An exasperating and embarrassing part of being a clergyperson in our time is being identified with that sort of thing: with hard-sell salesmen and women of religious dogma, having it assumed that I too am a professional threatened of eternal torture, and in general, being lumped together with those whose God is so small, so picky, so vindictive, so ill-humored, so rigid, so capricious, and so without compassion as to be beyond credibility for any thoughtful person.

True, by the thousand, people continue to be persuaded that this is the God revealed in Jesus, and that the only right way to present the Christian faith is to get people to “swallow whole” a collection of beliefs, religious doctrines, and mystical experiences.

But trust me, the Christian faith is far better than that. In fact, if you sometimes feel like a “closet atheist” because there is much of what was taught you in the name of Christianity, that you CANNOT swallow, the fact is, that your “not swallowing it” could be a sign of deeper spirituality and understanding on your part. In fact, as a clergy person, sometimes you feel that you have to spend a large part of your ministry “de-programming” people from what are destructive, unhealthy, and totally un-Biblical beliefs.

If, for example, you have trouble picturing the God of all creation, the God of life, of love, of Jesus, damning someone forever because that person never got around to accepting someone’s particular formula of salvation, of never being correctly baptized, you’re right. That God doesn’t exist.

If you have some serious, secret reservations about another person’s religious conversion because, following it, he or she became more close-minded, more judgmental, less charitable, and less humble, your reservations are well-founded. There’s nothing about

God's touch or action in our lives that should ever make a person smaller-spirited, self-congratulating or narrow-minded.

If it seems to you that surely faith HAS to be something more than whipping yourself into believing some canned, obligatory, undiscussable beliefs – that it must have far more to do with who you are becoming, than with any collection of religious doctrines you've made yourself believe, **GOOD THINKING!** To put it somewhat in scriptural terms, Jesus did not come among us that we might have beliefs more abundantly, but that we would find life more abundantly.

All of which brings us to the matter of how faith DOES happen – how it is passed on to others. If not by religious pressurings, warnings, pesterings, cajolings, and haranging, then how does it happen?

To state it simply, overwhelmingly faith is “caught,” not “taught.” Words, ideas and spiritual concepts may play some part in the way faith is awakened in another. But, as Dr. Youngblood and Rev. Paul Nickerson have related it to us, our efforts need to be directed toward serving people's needs; finding out the needs of the community around us, and addressing those needs, rather than seeking to fit people or pigeon-hole them into certain slots in our particular way of operation, in other words, a servant ministry to people. Religious browbeating and brainwashing that was so familiar in times past in presenting the Christian faith, makes about as much sense as using those same tactics to get someone to fall in love with you. One doesn't get the real thing that way. Again, faith is usually caught, not taught.

Caught from whom? It is caught, for example, from **CONFIDENT** people – not strident or pushy, but quietly confident. They are spiritual people who don't have to prove anything about themselves or about God or about the rightness of their set of beliefs. Their quiet-but-obvious faith, their at-homeness in life, and their trust that God is at work in and around them even though they don't know how or where, is illuminating and inspiring. If you do manage to engage them in a religious discussion, you will quickly discover that their God isn't the fragile, helpless, paranoid God who is constantly in danger from any new questions, new philosophies, or new religious practices that come and go among us. Nor is their God, the tired, aged, tottering old deity that some keep insisting that we have to “get back to” apparently because poor old God can't keep up with us human beings any longer.

Faith is caught also from OPEN people. They're open because they're in touch with a God who is open, a God who is not a nitpicking, uptight, judgment-happy, label-checking, bickering, hair-splitting God, but is rather the very God who created our human diversity – a God who not only loves it but enjoys it. Theirs is not a God who loses any sleep whatsoever, for example, over whether someone has undergone the right kind of baptism or whether she understands or even cares much about the doctrine of the Trinity, or whether he doubts the story of Jesus' mother's divinity, or whether he finds the idea of reincarnation interesting, or any of the other trivia that some just assume God obsesses over. It's not that strong convictions aren't a part of the personal faith of open people. It's just that they're humble enough to know that God is always yet larger and more embracing than is their own, most recent, grandiose, perfectly certain thought about God.

Ones from whom faith is typically caught are persons of GOOD WILL – gentle people, one might say. They prefer reconciliation to confrontation. All things being equal, they would rather cooperate than compete. As upset as they may be with some evil perpetrated by someone else, they still feel bad when suffering comes upon him. They don't get sucked into revenge because of the ugliness it ignites in themselves. They are those who carefully keep track of the difference between hating an enmity versus hating an enemy.

They are also PATIENT people -- these ones whose faith in God is most likely to be caught by others. They aren't complacent, mind you, but they're patient. Here too, it has directly to do with their understanding of God. They're willing to be patient because, throughout the Bible and throughout the whole human adventure, they've seen how it keeps turning out that human beings never are able, at the time, to see the whole picture of which they're a part, are too close to it to see all that's evolving, and unable to see all that is struggling to be born.

LIGHTHEARTEDNESS is also an aspect of faith that catches people's attention. The spiritually healthy always seem to have a well-honed sense of humor about themselves, about the whole human adventure, even about religion itself. They are that way, not only because it's more fun, but because they have figured out that God gave humor, uniquely to human beings, because without it we become so infuriatingly tedious, ponderous, and boring.

And to mention only one more, those from whom faith is caught are almost always the IDEALISTIC ones. They're not dreamy simpletons, mind you, but are ones who hold out

tenaciously (and often eloquently) for what COULD come to be (and should come to be) in our life together. They are ones who don't mind looking foolish in their hoping and hungering for reconciliations and restorings and justice and peace.

But you get the idea, don't you. Happily, faith continues to be caught, person to person, despite all those who have been turned off by having boorish forms of religiousness shoved in their faces.

I hope that reflecting on it this way can be encouraging to those whose personal faith, whose relationship with their God is solid, but who, in reaction against insipid, hard sell God-talk, feel a bit tongue-tied, reluctant to talk about their own spirituality lest it comes across as intrusive and religiously arrogant.

Don't worry about it. In a time in which the Christian faith seems, so often, to be drowning in its own wordiness, diatribes and arguings, what your LIFE, NOT your mouth, is saying, could well make you among the most effective witnesses God has right now.

So relax and let it happen. It DOES work that way. In fact, it always has. Jesus put the matter quite bluntly. "Either make the tree good, and its fruit good, or make the tree bad, and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit . . . For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks."