

"How Can I Share My Faith?"

A sermon by the Rev. Jim Bell

Duke Memorial United Methodist Church  
Durham, NC  
10:55 a.m. Sunday, June 10, 2007

Text: Acts 8:26-40      I John 4:7-21      NRSV

Opening prayer: Lord Jesus, open our hearts and minds to your message, so that we may tell others of your love – for us and them. Amen.

SENSITIVE TO THE HOLY SPIRIT AND OTHERS

There was a fellow who stopped by his friend's store to buy a jar of mustard. The shelves were loaded with salt – bags and bags of salt. The storekeeper said he had some mustard, but that he would have to go down to the cellar to find it. His friend went down with him. There, to his surprise, were still more bags of salt. Everywhere he looked he could see salt.

The friend said, "You must sell a lot of salt in this store!" The storekeeper replied, "No, I can't sell salt. But the fellow who sells me salt – boy call he sell salt!"

That salt salesman had a lot of enthusiasm for his task – selling salt. May the Lord give us the same kind of enthusiasm for the gospel and for sharing our faith. We share our faith by telling others what it is like to be in love with God. At the heart of faith sharing is one person giving another person a vision of what it's like to be in love with God.

This is an important part of our church's vision – to invite people to a life of faith in Christ, to invite them to come to our church. Going to church is not an end in itself. That is not the ultimate goal. Inviting people to come to our church is a way of

introducing them to the Lord. We seek to help men, women and children begin a life of relationship with God. Church supports that relationship.

I have experienced God's incredible love. I believe the saving message of Jesus Christ. I believe that every wayward person I know would live a vastly better life if God's love, grace and redemption were operating in their lives.

Our scripture lesson from the Acts of the Apostles gives us some important instructions about how we can share our faith with others around us. The lesson begins with an angel of the Lord telling Philip to get up and travel south to the road between Jerusalem and Gaza. Philip is in relationship with God.

The foundation of sharing our faith is a vivid relationship with God. Philip loved God. Philip was part of a mission that he loved – to tell other people about Jesus Christ. Philip also cared about people who did not know that faith. He wanted to share with others that life is better, richer and truer if one has faith in Christ and lives in a faith community.

We nurture our relationship with God through prayer, worship, study and service.

Philip is obedient to the angel of the Lord, and he is traveling along the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. As he travels, he sees an important Ethiopian official, seated in his chariot. This official would be the equivalent of the Secretary of the Treasury in our country today. This official had traveled to Jerusalem to worship God. Now he was returning home to Ethiopia. He is reading the book of the prophet Isaiah.

Philip sees this Ethiopian official. The Holy Spirit impresses upon Philip to go over to the chariot and join it. The Holy Spirit guides us through ordinary warmth and concern for people. Philip's natural inclination was to care about this man. Authentic interest in people is part of the Spirit's guidance. Think of all the chance encounters we have in which people will respond to genuine friendship.

Again, Philip is sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit. He obeys the Spirit, and runs up to the chariot of this Ethiopian official.

In his book, *Just Walk Across the Room*, Bill Hybels writes that the highest value in sharing our faith is staying attuned and cooperative with the Holy Spirit. Finding words to adequately define the promptings of the Holy Spirit is not easy. Promptings are mystical. They are intangible – and they're real. Staying attuned to the Spirit means that we have a heightened awareness of the things going on around us.

We walk over to someone when the Spirit says to walk. We talk when the Spirit says to talk, and we fall silent when the Spirit says that we have said enough.

Staying attuned to the Holy Spirit is important, and one way to stay attuned is through prayer. Prayer is a way that we nurture our relationship with God. Prayer is more about receiving from God than it is about asking God for things.

2,000 years ago Philip was open to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Bill Hybels writes that he tries to begin each morning with a prayer like this: "My life is in your hands, God. Use me to point someone toward you today. I promise to cooperate in any way I can. If you want me to say a word for you today, I'll do that. If you want me to keep quiet but demonstrate love and servanthood, by your Spirit's power I will. I'm fully available to you today, so guide me by your Spirit."

Another important part of sharing our faith is to take the time to listen, to meet people where they are, at the point of their need. We see that Philip did this. When Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the Ethiopian reading the prophet Isaiah, Philip asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" The official replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" Then he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him in the chariot.

Philip began his relationship with the Ethiopian official with the needs of the

official. Philip didn't insist on first telling the man about what had just happened to him in Samaria or about the wonderful experience of Pentecost. Philip was concerned about the man's immediate needs, what was going on with him.

It is significant for us to take the time to listen to people. Every day we have an opportunity to develop relationships and eventually express God's love. Try a little experiment this week. As you pull into your driveway, fight the temptation to look past your neighbor. Stop long enough to wonder what some of their needs might be. Offer a prayer for them.

When you drop off your dry cleaning, take four seconds to smile, and ask the name of the person standing behind the counter. If he or she has served you well, then say so. When you run into the drugstore to pick up your prescription, take a good look at the clerk who's assisting you. What's that person's story? Will you carve out two minutes to find out? If you happen to bump into your mail carrier during the day, invest a few moments in discovering if she has a spouse or kids. What do they like to do around town when she has a day off?

Listening and building relationships is a crucial part of sharing our faith.

## PROCLAIMING THE GOOD NEWS ABOUT JESUS

After Philip had listened to the Ethiopian official's questions about the passage from Isaiah, Philip began explaining the scriptures to him. The book of Acts tells us, "he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus." (Acts 8:35) Philip told him the way of salvation through Jesus Christ. That is important for us to do also. The apostle Paul wrote the Romans, "I am not ashamed of the gospel. It is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith. . . ." (Romans 1:16)

We may wonder, "How can I do this in a simple, concise way without going to

seminary to learn how to preach?”

One of the simplest ways to share the good news of Jesus that I have discovered comes from Bill Hybels. You can share that many people believe that religion is spelled D-O. It is all about whether you do enough things to earn God’s favor. In order for God to love you, the thinking goes, you have to do this and do that and strive and sacrifice and clean up your act.

On the other hand, Christianity is spelled D-O-N-E. The Bible teaches that what Christ did on the cross was enough. God loved us so much that Christ became the atoning sacrifice for our sins. He did what we could never do. If we trust in what he did, our sins can be forgiven and we can find favor in God’s eyes right here, right now. It is based on what Jesus has done. Writing those two little words, “do and done” on a slip of paper cements this powerful truth on a person’s heart and mind.

Another crucial element in sharing our faith is telling our story. What difference has Christ made in your life? Your story does not have to be dramatic. It doesn’t have to be like the apostle Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus, seeing a bright light and being struck blind. Your story needs to be brief, focused, coherent and true. Make it easy to understand. Convey it with a humble and honest heart.

Bill Hybels writes that if you take more than 45 seconds to tell it, you will start to lose people. Now that is a focused story! As an example for you, here is my story:

I have experienced God’s love through caring parents and others in the church for as long as I can remember. I accepted and embraced God’s love revealed in Jesus Christ. Ever since then, God has directed my life. God strengthens me and comforts me in good times and on challenging days. It is so wonderful! Every day I try to live out my “thank you” to such an incredible God. I find meaning in my life in following Christ.

What is your story? Can you tell it simply in 45 seconds?

Philip may have told part of his story to the Ethiopian official. We do not know.

## GOD LOVES US, SO WE LOVE

We do know that after Philip told the Ethiopian the good news about Jesus, the Ethiopian wanted to be baptized. Philip may have told him what Peter preached on the day of Pentecost, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:38)

They found some water, and Philip baptized the Ethiopian. It was a great experience for him. The Ethiopian went on his way rejoicing. Now, the Ethiopian official was a different nationality and a different race than Philip. It did not matter. The Holy Spirit led Philip to this official, and Philip shared his faith with him.

We have examined some important elements of sharing our faith: (1) having a vivid relationship with God, (2) being sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit, (3) meeting people where they are. Listening to people and developing relationships, (4) Telling God's story, (5) Telling our story.

Now, let us look for a moment at why we share our faith. The basic theological reason is found in our epistle lesson. Love comes from God. In fact, God is love. God loved us by sending his own Son into the world, so that we might live through him. Because God so loved us, we ought also to love one another. (1 John 4:7-11)

What better way is there to love someone than by telling them the way to real life? The greatest single gift we can give to people around us is an introduction to the God who created them, who loves them, and who has a purpose for their lives.

Sharing our faith can have as much of an effect on us as it does on our listeners. Martin Buber, the Jewish philosopher, recalls: "My grandfather was lame. Once they

asked him to tell a story about his teacher, and he related how his master used to hop and dance while he prayed. My grandfather rose as he spoke and was so swept away by his story that he himself began to hop and dance to show how the master had done it. From that hour he was cured of his lameness." When we tell the story of our Master, we too experience his power.

In her book, *Unbinding the Gospel*, Martha Reese records the reasons some people give for why they want to help other people to become Christians:

- "A relationship with Christ makes life make sense – it's true."
- "I love God so much I want people to know this joy."
- "Being in a church community gives you a way to serve others and keep growing."
- "As a Christian, you're part of something important that lasts forever."
- "I want to take as many people with me to heaven as I can."
- "Children need to learn about God. Parents need help raising kids."
- I used to feel so guilty about things I had done. Christ has forgiven me, and my church friends love me. I want to help others now."

Here is how some other people who are sharing their faith talk about it:

"I can't tell you what it felt like to see my sister baptized after all those years and all the tough things she had gone through. It was like a new start. I really understood in the Bible then about being 'born again.' That's what happened to Mary. She was reborn, and her life has been a lot better since."

Another person said, "I started inviting people to church, and they became Christians. Now 9 of my friends who weren't attending a church before are in my church. I love these people! I can't tell you what it means to me to have had a part in helping them move into faith."

Still another reported, “I believe so strongly in the church and the power of God to heal people’s lives through this community.”

Simply put, sharing our faith is helping connect people with God. Becky Pippert tells about a friend who is not a Christian. She is very friendly, very bright and extremely sensitive. She had almost no church background. She was intrigued that Becky took her faith seriously. After a number of conversations, they began to meet once a week to study the Gospel of Mark.

They were studying the passage where Jesus meets the prostitute at Simon’s banquet. Becky’s friend looked straight at her and said, “I just can’t get over Jesus. He is so opposite of everything I had imagined him to be. All my life I have felt like I was worth a piece of dirt. And if there is a God, I was sure that he went along with my opinion. But he doesn’t. No one has to tell me I am lost. I know I’m lost. If there’s a God, I assumed he despised my lostness. But Jesus doesn’t despise you if you’re lost. He loves you if you’re lost. And according to Jesus, if you’re lost and you know that you are lost, you are probably close to the kingdom of God. Can you imagine that, someone like me close to the kingdom of God?”

Becky replied, “Oh yes I can. I can imagine it very easily.” Tears welled up in her eyes as she tried to explain, “You see, I can’t get over Jesus either. He is all that you are seeing and even more. I’ve been a Christian now for 20 years, and the obedience is no easier but the joy is so much deeper. You may never decide to give your life to God, which would be tragic. But now that you have caught a glimpse of what Jesus is truly like, I don’t think you will ever be quite the same.”

That is an example of sharing our faith. We share our faith by telling others what it is like to be in love with God.

The invitation to Christian discipleship today is that we care enough about the

people around us that we share our faith with them. Listen to them. Become a friend.  
Tell God's story. Tell your story.

Kurt Kaiser said it well almost 40 years ago, "That's how it is with God's love/  
once you've experienced it. You spread his love to everyone. You want to pass it on."

Pass it on. Amen.