

Sharing Our Story

We're now nearing the end of the season of Easter, this seven-week season that began on Easter morning and ends with the Day of Pentecost in two weeks' time. Throughout this season, the normal pattern of readings from the Old Testament is set aside, replaced by readings from the book of Acts, The Acts of the Apostles. The purpose of this substitution, I think, is to draw our attention, our focus, to the astounding story at the heart of our faith: God's resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

Over the past several weeks, the stories from Acts have included Peter preaching to his fellow Jews that the crucified Jesus was God's Messiah, and we are told that three thousand people heard the message and were baptized. We heard the story a few weeks ago of how the early church lived in response to the Good News of the resurrection: they devoted themselves to the gospel message and let their lives be shaped by it, sharing their food and all their resources in common.

Last week, you heard the story of the martyrdom of Stephen, how he was put to death for witnessing before a hostile audience as to what God was doing in Jesus. Today, we have the story of Paul, the Apostle to the

Gentiles, going to the heart of gentile territory—downtown Athens, Greece—to debate with classical philosophers.

Over all these weeks, the story of God's resurrection of Jesus from the dead is propounded, presented, proclaimed, again and again and again, in multiple formats, in multiple places, to a variety of audiences. In a way of course, we are the primary audience, overhearing these stories again and again.

The season of Easter makes this story the focus of our worship; it doesn't allow us to be distracted by other parts of Scripture, or by other aspects of God and God's relationship with us. We are meant to hear this story, and encounter this story, repeatedly. The purpose of all this repetition is to drive home to us the centrality of this story to our faith; and then to inspire us with the examples of Peter and Stephen and Paul and the members of that early church that shared everything.

Those examples are meant to inspire us to do as they did: to witness to the story at the heart of our faith, to evangelize—to use the word I preached about a few weeks ago.

When I preached that sermon a few weeks ago about evangelism, I had the sense that it made some of you a little nervous. A couple of people spoke to me afterwards about their reticence with evangelism. To a large degree I think this is a cultural issue, especially for liberal Christians of a certain age.

We've been trained, in the liberal church, as well as in our wider Canadian culture, to affirm an ethic of 'live and let live,' or 'to each their own.' We've been taught to value diversity, and to steer clear of difference, and to talk about the things we have in common with others. This is especially true for those of us who are veterans of the debates over Canadian unity and Québec separatism that were so much a part of our national life from the 1960s through the 1990s. Governments and political elites encouraged this focus on common Canadian values to keep us together. But, the result of all this is that we end up with a kind of "lowest common denominator" form of religion.

We talk about a common core shared by all the world's enduring religious traditions, and shared by non-religious people as well: a set of shared values. It's as though the goal is a form of religion, or of spirituality, that doesn't offend anyone.

If you carry that far enough, you end up where our atheist minister in Ontario, Gretta Vosper, is—with a form of church that is based on shared values, values that can be affirmed by people from a variety of faith

backgrounds, as well as by those who are secular humanists or atheists. But even if we don't take it that far, we are still tempted in this climate, and with our heritage, to remove any of the offending bits of our story; anything that sets us apart from others, any particular claims that our faith might make that others might disagree with.

Perhaps this is part of our famous Canadian niceness: we don't want to be seen as forcing our views on anyone else. I think that's all part of our struggle with evangelism. The problem with this approach, though, is that while we don't offend anyone, we also don't have very much to offer anyone. You don't need to come to church to get good solid Canadian values.

I think this speaks to where we find ourselves as a church today. Nice, inoffensive, neatly blended in to older, middle class culture; but losing our ability to offer something distinctive to the world.

This story of Paul in Athens is an apt story for us in these circumstances. It's a very similar situation to the one we find ourselves in. Paul also faced huge cultural barriers to evangelism, to sharing the story of what God was doing in Jesus. Paul was a Jewish man, a persecutor of the early church—a kind of anti-evangelist—who then had this extraordinary experience of meeting the risen Christ on the way to Damascus.

Through that experience Paul understood himself to be God's apostle

to the gentiles. He was called and commissioned to share the incredible story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus with people who didn't share his, and Jesus', Jewish background.

Paul finds himself in Athens in a culture that is every bit as hostile to the gospel as we might imagine our culture to be.

This is the centre of classical Greek culture, with its highly developed artistic heritage and sophisticated intellectual culture. The story that Paul had to tell—about a poor Palestinian Jew from a nowhere town, who developed a reputation as a wonder worker and teacher; a man who was cruelly put to death by the authorities in the most humiliating way; and the claim that this man was God's Messiah, raised by God from the dead—this story would not only have been laughable to Paul's audience in Athens; it would also have been deeply offensive to their cultured intellects. This is simply not how the gods behave.

But Paul takes the risk—the risk of being laughed at, the risk of being ridiculed, spat upon, even arrested. We face some of those risks—being ridiculed perhaps—but we don't face some of the more serious consequences Paul faced. Paul does it because he believes he has been given something to share, to offer to folks who haven't heard it yet. He believes that the story of Jesus can be a gift in other people's lives the way it has been in his own. He's not trying to force his views on

other people; he's compelled to share a gift with them.

Paul starts by affirming aspects of Greek culture: "I see how extremely religious you are in every way." He's honoring their religious instincts. Because the Greeks don't share Paul's Jewish heritage, he has to find other bridging points between his faith and their culture. He notices that they have an altar with the inscription "To an unknown god," and he sees this an opportunity. 'You are worshipping an unknown god; well, I am here to tell you about this God.' And he proceeds to tell them about the God of his heritage, the God who has done a new thing in Jesus.

Paul makes a connection between their innate yearning, their groping for a divine reality that transcends what can be touched or seen—he connects that yearning with the God of the Bible "who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth." Paul teaches the Athenians that the things they worship as gods—objects made of gold, silver, or stone—are not worthy of their worship, because after all they are just products of human hands. Paul is trying to help them to connect their yearning to its proper source, and its proper object, the creator God.

There are some good lessons for us in this. Like Paul, we may be surrounded by people who think us foolish for being followers of Jesus. We may know people who would get angry, or be offended, if we brought up our

religious faith in conversation. But if we're like Paul in having had some kind of encounter with the risen Jesus that has transformed our lives, then like him, we probably have a sense that we have something valuable to share with others.

That doesn't mean we have to force our religious views on others, any more than we would want to force our political views on others. We are always called to engage respectfully with those we might have differences with. Like Paul, we can look for common ground, observing and listening for those sometimes inarticulate spiritual yearnings expressed by others. Others might share with you stories about the objects of worship in their lives—wealth, career success, expensive toys—and how all of those things don't seem to satisfy their yearnings. Those might turn out to be openings into conversation about how your faith has made a difference in your life. Again, always respectfully.

Sharing our story is at the heart of what we are about as a Christian community. It's what will keep us alive, and keep us growing and changing, and developing along with the community around us. To say that even more clearly: it's impossible for us to be the church without being willing to share the good news, to offer the world the story of what God has done in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It starts with us truly experiencing this story, and letting it

shape our lives. And as this story bears fruit in our lives, as it shapes our priorities and our choices, that becomes our story to tell, our witness to our faith.

I'll close with a prayer from Will Willimon:

“Lord Jesus, in your glorious resurrection you returned to us and commanded us, “Go! Tell!” You not only returned to us but you also commissioned us to be missionaries. We don't know why you chose people like us, but we do know wherefore: we are to show and tell the world the news about you and your reign.

Forgive us when we keep the good news to ourselves. Prod us to risk moving out and speaking up in your name. Show us the ever expanding reach of your love as you reach out to others. Put our church in motion, in movement to the world. Give us what we need to be your missionaries, participating in the adventure of your embrace of the whole world.”

Amen.

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