Everybody Witnesses

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Acts 1:1-8

Sermon Series: Recalculating

People praise what they enjoy.

The story is told of a preacher who was an avid golfer. He played golf every chance he could get. One Sunday morning was picture-perfect for golf. The sun was shining, not a cloud in the sky, and the temperature was just right. The preacher found the urge to play golf irresistible, so he called his elders to report that he was sick and couldn’t preach. Then he loaded his clubs in the car and drove 40 miles to a golf course where no one would recognize him.

An angel, who was watching, was rather annoyed. He complained to God that the preacher should be punished for what he was doing. God smiled and said nothing.

The preacher strolled to the first hole and teed up his ball. He hit a gorgeous drive, right down the center of the fairway. His shot landed on the green and rolled straight into the cup; a 350-yard hole-in-one. The preacher was beside himself with delight, but the angel was downright angry. He asked God, “Why do you let him get away with this?”

God smiled and said, “Who is he going to tell?”

You see, part of the delight is sharing some pleasure with someone else. People talk about home remodeling because they enjoy redecorating their homes. People talk about their favorite restaurants because they enjoy good food. People talk about their favorite musicians because they enjoy good music. People praise what they enjoy.

C.S. Lewis came to faith in Christ well into his adult years. As he began to read the Bible in earnest, he found it rather odd that God commands us to praise him. It struck Lewis as rather self-serving; as though God was fishing for compliments. Why does God need to be told he is good and great?

But if God is truly God, he doesn’t need our praise and worship. Lewis came to discover a universal truth: people praise what they enjoy. Praise completes the enjoyment.

Lewis writes in his book, Reflections on the Psalms, “It is not out of wonderment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are; the delight is incomplete until it is expressed. It is frustrating to have discovered a new author and not be able to tell everyone how good he is; to come suddenly, at the turn in the road, upon some mountain valley of unexpected grandeur
Everybody witnesses to what they enjoy.

and then to have to keep silent because the people with you care for it no more than for a tin can in the ditch; to hear a good joke and find no one to share it with.”

*Everybody Witnesses* is the title of this sermon. Everybody witnesses to what he/she enjoys. Christian witnessing isn’t fundamentally any different from witnessing about home remodeling or good music or fine cuisine.

Our Scripture lesson from the book of Acts recounts the story of Jesus’ life, death, resurrection and impending ascension into heaven. Jesus’ disciples still want to know, after three years, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). They still fail to grasp Jesus’ worldwide mission.

Jesus answers, “You shall receive power (dunamin) when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be my witnesses (martyres)” (1:8). This Greek word dunamin, translated as power in this verse, is where we derive our English word dynamite. The Holy Spirit is what gives believers new strength and greater capacity for witnessing.

The Greek word for witness, martyres, is where we derive our English word martyr. Martyrs witness to the point of death. Martyrdom, you could say, is the ultimate witness. When people take the witness stand, they are asked to testify to what they have seen and heard. That’s what Jesus asks from his disciples. He wants them to tell people what they have seen and heard.

The little conjunction “and” serves a useful role in this sentence. It connects the Holy Spirit dynamism with our witness. God provides the power and we supply the witness. There is something we bring to the table, namely, our willingness to talk about spiritual things. But the Holy Spirit serves as the catalyst to transform these once timid disciples into bold witnesses for Jesus Christ.

“You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). In answer to the disciples’ earlier question about restoring the kingdom to Israel, Jesus calls upon them to carry his message to the ends of the earth.

This verse is a virtual one-sentence outline of the book of Acts. Chapters 1-7 recount the disciples’ witness in their home city of Jerusalem. Chapters 8-12 chronicle their witness in the outlying regions of Judea and Samaria. (Samaria is significant, since this is the first time salvation is preached to people outside the Jewish community.) Chapters 13-28 describe the church’s witness to the ends of the earth, which, religiously speaking, is Rome itself.

Jesus wants his disciples to think globally, yet he urges them to act locally. Begin where you are, with Jerusalem.
What corresponds to our Jerusalem? There are estimated to be 400,000 people living in a ten-mile radius of our church. The median age of people living in this ten-mile radius is 38. The largest population group is people 30-50. The fastest growing population happens to be children less than eight years of age. The percentage of single people in our area is several points higher than the national average; so is the percentage of two-parent families. The number of Asian Americans is expected to reach one in five people by the year 2015.

Our elders and staff have identified five strategic objectives or advancing goals as well as two sustaining goals for our church over the next few years. We’re sharing them with you in the hope that you can help us discern where God wants us to invest our time and resources in the future. We’ve preached on the first three objectives having to do with spiritual transformation, young adults and marriage and family. We come to our church’s fourth strategic goal: Expand the influence of the gospel and VPC through a focused outreach to the 146,000 households living near VPC who do not have a church home. If a primary purpose of our church is to bear witness to Jesus, what role can we play in spreading the good news of God’s saving love in Jesus Christ to this area?

One hundred and forty-six thousand households represent a lot of people. Don’t let these big numbers intimidate you. Start with your few. Who are the people in your circle of family and friends whom you can influence for Christ?

Rob Bell founded the Mars Hill Church in Grand Rapids in 1999. His church was growing so rapidly in those early years that people were losing their tempers in the parking lot. So one Sunday Rob said to his congregation, “If you are here and you are not a Christian, we are thrilled to have you in our midst. We want you to feel at home. But if you are here and you’re a Christian, but you can’t even be a Christian in the parking lot, please don’t go out into the world and tell people you’re a Christian. You’ll screw it up for the rest of us.”

Wow! That’s bold! But he’s right. Our words and deeds must match. Otherwise, our witness falls flat.

Some of you have a stereotype of Christian witnessing that isn’t pretty. It’s aggressive, intimidating and even hostile. This is not what Jesus has in mind. He wants you to witness in a manner consistent with your personality and temperament. Just be yourself. Your greatest potential for witnessing is among people who know and love you the most. When people trust you, they are more likely to take seriously what you have to say.

Witnessing involves active listening. Listen carefully to what people say and they will...
reveal what they value and where they are vulnerable. Then you can tailor what you say to address their concerns.

People will sometimes tell me, “I can’t witness. I don’t know enough.” Our job isn’t to communicate the deep intricacies of the faith. Our job is to testify to what we have seen and heard. If you have a hard time keeping everything straight, remember three simple words: creation, fall and redemption. Creation—we are created to live in relationship with God. Fall—we fall out of relationship through God through something called sin. Sin is anything that causes separation in our relationship with God. Redemption—God offers to redeem or rescue our lives through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Said another way: God creates. Sin destroys. God redeems.

Here are my four don’ts related to witnessing. Don’t be afraid to say “I don’t know.” You don’t need to know all the answers. If you knew all the answers, you’d be a know-it-all and nobody likes a know-it-all. People need to know that you can have faith without having everything all figured out. Be willing to admit your struggle and doubt. Otherwise, faith will seem hopelessly out of reach for people.

Don’t argue with people. I haven’t met a person yet who has been won to Christ through arguing.

Don’t force the issue. If someone isn’t interested, don’t push it. The right thing at the wrong time is still the wrong thing.

Don’t predetermine whether people will be interested in what you have to say. Some of the least likely people are the most interested while some of the most likely people aren’t the least bit interested.

Pray about your witnessing. After Jesus commissioned his disciples to be witnesses, they devoted themselves to prayer (1:14). They didn’t embark immediately on a major missionary endeavor; they simply gathered for prayer. Ask God to give you a heart for the enormity of human need all around us. Speak to God about your friend before you speak to your friend about God.

Maybe you are new to the Christian faith and this church, so the thought of witnessing seems rather far-fetched. Let me offer you this invitation. What God wants most with you is a relationship. He doesn’t want your obedience or your money; God wants you. Every one of us here falls out of relationship with God through something called sin. Sin is what separates us from God. When we open our hearts to Jesus Christ, God restores this relationship. If this expresses the desire of your heart, open your heart to God.