

PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving God, we praise you because you know us better than we know ourselves. You are the great God that knows every flower, every bug, every molecule across this universe of creation. You know the wounds we carry deep inside us, even when we do not know how to name or articulate them, and you love us all the same when we act out from that brokenness. Forgive us our folly and lead us to consistently seek faithful living. For those joys and concerns that we have raise up in our speech and for those that exist knowingly or unknowingly in our hearts, we give ourselves to you, Gracious God, as we ask you to hear our prayers.

When we seek to fulfill our calling from Christ to make disciples of all nations, we recognize that it means we be the first example that our brothers and sisters see. Help us to proclaim you faithfully in our stories, our lives, and our authenticity. Lead us to share our stories with how you have touched us throughout our journeys, our actions that exemplify who we follow, and the authentic spirit of joyfulness that is rooted in a life dedicated to you. We pray all these things in the name of the one who loves us and redeems us each morning, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray...

SERMON

Hear these words from John 6:52-58:

“The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, ‘How can this man give us his flesh to eat?’ So Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live for ever.’”

And there you go. OK, why are you looking at me? Don't you just get it? Isn't scripture absolutely obvious by itself? Oh, you don't get it? What do you want me to do about it? Well, in all seriousness, I can see why. What is a scripture passage without academic explanation, without lively connection, without personal experience to bring us into what this scripture can possibly mean to us? We could go to the most touching places of the Gospels, read it several times, but if you have no reference to experience, no tools to discern it, then there will be no connection formed. Scripture, especially to someone who has never heard it, will mean nothing unless we can show how we relate to the words of scripture, in our experiences, our actions, our intentions. We need to bring the words of scripture alive, for if we follow Christ, we will know how scripture comes alive in our lives and our own stories.

So, we continue our evangelism theme. In our first sermon, we learned that "It's not about results," and we followed that up with the recognition that we should not do "Drive-by Evangelism" but that good, faithful evangelism "Begins with Friendship." Indeed, both are true and good. We've talked a lot about the "how" of evangelism, but we have not talked about the "what." What do we say? Scripture by itself means nothing to those who haven't heard it, so those evangelists that preach outside of sporting events aren't really doing much to spread the word of God when it's so dry and lacking connection. What does "Eternal Life" mean? What does it mean to live a life of faith? What in the heck does it mean that God loves us? It's not absolutely obvious and clear cut, especially to anyone who hasn't heard the vocabulary! So, here's our next message that you need to memorize: "We share our story and our lives." And that's it: we share our story. We also let our lives tell the story of God's love in other ways. Let's learn what that means in our own stories, our

own lives, and our journey to be authentic as we seek to be evangelists in our own unique ways.

We begin by sharing our stories. I'll start. As I consider my story, I think of many things. I remember in one of my Iliff classes, we were assigned to create a map of our life journeys and how we discerned the Holy Spirit to be acting through the course of our lives. Of course, this was a very incomplete picture. God works in ways that we have not yet experienced or that we have not yet discerned. For example, I remember God working very strongly in January of 2011. I was sitting at the Denver Broncos game against the San Diego Chargers, the final game of the year. This was in the third year of my Iliff career and I thought would be the last year. I remember sitting there, thinking this was really sad that I'd never get to go to another Broncos game. My plans were to return to Nebraska and serve as a pastor there. At the time, I thought that this was the natural grief of giving something up and moving onto a new part of my life. As I later came to realize, this had nothing to do with football, nothing to do with leaving Denver and all the places where I had been so comfortable. It really had something to do with what God was calling me to do. Through other experiences and discernment, I learned that my time at Iliff and in Denver were not complete; I still needed to be here for a little longer. I took up another degree program for Pastoral Care and spent one more year at Iliff. In retrospect, I truly believe that was the calling of God, and I see clearly why: I was able to get another degree that helped strengthen my call to ministry. I was able to meet new people that touched my life in unique ways. It brought me to this place, this time. Most importantly, I met the woman who would later become my wife and life partner.

Or, instead, I could have just thrown out some scripture, boxed up and ready for a smooth presentation. Which would strike your heart more? The thing is, we are attracted to story. Think about what you did when you got to church. Yes, you may have looked at the bulletin and gotten your hymnals in order. You may have done other business in preparation of worship. However, we are here because of community. I assume many of you touched base with your friends, family, and neighbors. And what do we do when we do that? We check in and tell each other stories. We share our life happenings not just in small details but in long flowing narratives that may be happy, may be sad, may be funny, but they share something about us and what is meaningful to us. We want to share and hear the whole narrative to get the whole picture. The final outcome and the details are only important when you know how it all ties together in the story, for it makes much more sense. For example, the Bartender says, "Why the long face?" Why aren't you laughing? That's the punch line of the joke. Or, I could say, a Horse walks into a bar. The Bartender asks him, "Why the long face?" Now you get it, because you know the story! How much more so when we share how our lives exemplify something about the Gospel and how Christ walks with us through the worst and the best of times. Our stories bring the Gospel to life in new ways. I told you a bit about my own life, but notice how I did it. I told you how I saw God working with and through me at Iliff, but I let it be my story and my story alone. I did not try to convince you of anything, I just said my piece and let you do as you would with it. As we saw at the beginning, reading scripture by itself can mean something to us, but when we share a story, an explanation, a connection to our own lives, it comes to life in a new way. If you want no other proof, look at what I'm doing right now: the sermon. We do exactly this every week.

While we can take heart in sharing what we fully know in our own stories, it's a fallacy to think that we only preach the gospel when we speak. There's an old quote attributed to St. Francis of Assisi that says, "Preach the Gospel always, and if necessary, use words." This is a loaded quote, but I like many things about this. What do the messages we say about God mean if they are not shown in what we do? St. Francis says we should preach the Gospel in our daily actions. And there are so many ways we can do that. If evangelism truly begins with friendship, as we learned last time, it means that we show up when we should. We provide support to people who need support. We work with those we agree with and those we don't. We treat all people civilly and seek to work together well. (And there's your sermon on the Government Shutdown). True friendship has feet; it goes where it needs to and works where there is need. If we proclaim a God that is based in loving relationship and we do not do it ourselves, our message becomes bankrupt; no one will believe a word we say.

On the other hand, it's a cop-out to think that evangelism can be exclusively done through our actions. That can lead to lazy evangelism that just presumes that other people know exactly what we are trying to tell them. That's some pretty shady ground. We live in a "Show Me" culture, but we also live in a very skeptical culture. If someone does a good deed for you, where does your mind go? Is it that they are enacting their faith? Maybe you think they're trying to get something out of the deal. Maybe they're insecure? It's good to be a good person, but what is never completely obvious is the why. What moves us? What makes us want to be the way we are? We have to put words to the actions. St. Francis quote does not exclude our words but says that we should preach the Gospel using words when the time is right and necessary. What works best is when we have words and match

those words with action. We just don't know what the message really is if we don't put words to our actions. True evangelism is a mix of words and actions, as each one takes a prominent position at one time or another, depending on what is needed.

There's just one piece left in this mix. I'll let you see what's missing. (Shared in a monotone, bored voice) "Let me tell you about my wonderful life. I've got some great stories to share about how God has touched me in so many ways. I am quite happy to serve because of the light of Jesus in my life." We can share our lives, we can enact the Gospel in action, but if we are trying to share joy without being joyful, what's the point? Faithful evangelism requires we be authentic, really ourselves, living from the heart. It requires our actions, our words, and who we really are be one and the same. We cannot "share our stories and ourselves" when there is a part missing along the way.

We have that "sixth sense" detection ability to tell when someone isn't being themselves. We can say and do the right thing, but when the authenticity is lost, we lose it all. My wife can easily tell when I'm talking to her and working with her but my mind and my attention are elsewhere. I am being authentic to my other attentions at her expense and that doesn't help anyone. We must keep our eyes and our minds on our brothers and sisters authentically, for when...we...don't...we'll...oh, sorry, I had to see how the Bears were doing, then our message will become bankrupt. See what I mean? We lose all our credibility when we say and do one thing but our attitudes don't demonstrate that we really care about what we're expressing. It's the constant battle of Christians, but it gains more traction when we remember that all the Jesus that so many people see is each of us.

When we hear Paul's account, we hear these parts of faithful evangelism. But let me tell you, Paul is not seeking to evangelize to the Corinthians. That relationship is already

founded; the relationship is instead between teacher and congregation. Paul is seeking to bring these people back to faithfulness. Of course, he tells his story. He does not do it to brag but to reinforce his position as teacher over them. It may sound like bragging to our ears, but he developed the social capital living among them in relationship for so long. His actions have proved the Gospel he preached. Also, we hear the authenticity in his speech. What makes you take notice is his fire. He truly believes what he says, and he has the social capital to draw these people in as fellow sisters and brothers in Christ. Story, action, authenticity. This is how Paul effectively does what we are called to do: "We share our story and our lives."

So, let's take it from the top: Evangelism first needs to be "not about results." People are people, and while we plant the seeds, it is up to God to grow them, not us. Evangelism secondly "begins with friendship." We do not put a time limit on when and how we share God, but we do believe that we can best share God when we are in a loving relationship when we care for each other as people, not as consumers. Today, we learned: "we share our stories and ourselves." These are important things for us to do and to live, for we deepen our own faith even as we share it in different ways with others. We recount our stories as a way to enliven our own faith in how God has been and will continue to be with us. We let the way we live our lives be another course of evangelism, and that builds integrity for us and rapport with others. We do all of these things with an authentic spirit, not putting on any kind of act, and God receives the praise. OK, so all of these things are important, but we have missed one key factor. That last factor is how we will end this series next week. Until we explore that new topic, tell your story, let your life preach, and be the person God created you to be. Thanks be to God. Amen and Amen.