

We Are The Church Together: A Focus

1 Peter 3:13-17

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13 Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? 14But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, 15but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you; 16yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. 17For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil.

Did you see the news story earlier this week about Mason Motz? Mason is a five-year-old boy living in Katy, Texas, and though he has always been able to make sounds, he was never able to speak. Early on, doctors attributed this inability to Sotos syndrome. It was natural for someone with Sotos to have cognitive delays. And so his parents started him in speech therapy as soon as he could. Unfortunately, this therapy did not solve the problem, so, both at school and at home, alternative methods of communication with Mason were developed. Posters were created with different objects pictured on them so that Mason could point to what he wanted or needed at the time.

It was thought that this might be the primary way Mason would communicate going forward. However, a trip to the dentist changed everything. While filling some cavities in Mason's mouth, his dentist noticed something that his Doctors had

previously missed. Mason was also dealing with *ankyloglossia*. This is the fancy medical term for being “tongue-tied.” There was a band of tissue that was literally tying Mason’s tongue down to the floor of his mouth.

After a small procedure to loosen the band, the change in Mason was immediate. On the night after his procedure, instead of pointing to a picture of food, Mason said, “Mama, I’m hungry.” And the words have been flowing ever since. As his father said, “He always had the words inside him. It wasn’t an inability to learn the words or form the words. It was just this physical inability to make them come out of his mouth.”

Many of us can relate to Mason. It’s not that we can’t speak or that we have some sort of physical inability. Some of us have the gift of verbosity. It’s what keeps the rest of us from beating the Baptists to lunch on Sundays...Yet, when the idea of sharing our faith with someone else - talking about why Jesus Christ matters to us - we get tongue tied. We can’t seem to form the words. No one would mistake us for Maeyken Wens.

Maeyken Wens was an Anabaptist woman living in Belgium in the later half of the sixteenth century. She was the wife of a bi-vocational Anabaptist preacher and stonemason, and the mother of nine children. In April 1573, Maeyken Wens was arrested and imprisoned by Catholic authorities for engaging in Bible studies and prayer groups with other women. Over the next six months, priests would come to her cell and demand that she denounce her faith; demand that she embrace the Catholic church-state dogma. But after months of imprisonment and physical torture could not sway her, a tribunal ruled that she was to be burned at the stake. Further, because Maeyken Wens was so eager to talk about her faith, something she would have likely been able to do in the public square at her execution, the authorities ordered the construction of an iron device that would literally screw her tongue down. And so,

silenced by tongue screws, on October 6, 1573, 445 years ago this week, Wens was burned at the stake for her faith.

Today, our witness hasn't been silenced by tongue screws or *ankyloglossia*. But, there is still a lot of silence. There is still a reluctance to share our faith stories. But let me partially ease your mind with a dose of reality. This reluctance isn't something new to you or simply a characteristic of our generation. Our hesitancy to witness started a long time ago...more than 1600 years ago.

If you were to hop in a time machine and travel back in time, you would see that in the first three hundred years of the church's existence, the Christian church was a counterculture. It was a marginal religion as compared to Judaism or too many of the other pagan religions of the first three centuries after Christ's death. And if you ran into a Christian on the street or popped into a house church, you would see that in those early years, Christians had no problem offering verbal explanations of why they lived and believed as they did. But in the fourth century, when Constantine the Great, the Roman Emperor, made Christianity the dominant religion of the Roman empire, the Christian church's position in the world changed. Now that the church had political power, and pagans were being forced to become Christians, the need for an articulate witness began to go away. In this new era of Christendom, being a Christian was unavoidable...and convincing someone of that was the role of the government.

Over the course of multiple centuries, several bad patterns emerged in the church. The first was directly related to Christianity's new place in the world. Since "everyone" was a Christian, faith was only passed on by genetic means – parent-to-child. And since everyone was a Christian, the church no longer had a need for missional gifts – apostles, prophets, and evangelists. Instead, a second bad pattern emerged where all the church did was concentrate on the maintenance gifts – being pastors and teachers. These pastors and teachers performed the sacraments and spoke for the people instead

of equipping them for the work of ministry. The articulation of faith became a profession.

These two patterns led to a third bad pattern. Since everyone around them was a Christian, and since the faith was being taught to them by professionals, Christians began to view faith-sharing as something done, not locally, but in far away, distant places. Missionaries weren't needed close by. They were needed in the far corners of the world. The missional work of sharing the gospel became something done elsewhere. And, regrettably, if you know our history, Christianity has a checkered past when it came to this missionary work. Missionaries were not associated with listening and testimony. In many cases, Christianity was imposed upon people with violence and cultural imperialism.

I would love to say that these bad habits are all in the past. But while these patterns don't look the same today, but they are still present. First, many Christians living here in the United States like to refer to our country as a "Christian nation." Whether that is true is a point of disagreement among some, but assuredly, many of our faith values are weaved into the laws, and lived out in the chambers, offices, and courtrooms, of our 50 states. Yet in declaring our country to be a "Christian nation," an old pattern could re-emerge. It could suggest that Christianity is an unavoidable, dominant religion and just expect everyone to get on board with this, without articulating why they should. Certainly, we don't want the words of the Founding Fathers to be the only words of witness for our faith...

Second, the vestiges of those bad patterns are found in the way we keep our circles limited. We live near other Christians. We do business with other Christians. We are friends with other Christians. This kind of homogeneity happens for good reasons. The New Testament pattern of community means that we like to fellowship with one

another. But, it also means that everyone we interact with is a Christian. As a result, there is seemingly no need to talk about our faith locally.

The third vestige of bad patterns from Christianity's past is actually found in how the church is sustained. There are three ways for the church to grow: 1) Biological growth; 2) Transfer growth; or 3) Conversion growth. In other words, the church grows by adding cradle Disciples, drawing other sheep to our flock, or by converting non-Christians into followers of Christ. In studying his own denomination, Conrad Kanagy, a Mennonite sociologist, found that only 2% of their membership came from non-Christian backgrounds. I can't imagine that we Disciples are doing much better than that. It's likely that more than 95% of us sitting here today are Christians who were born here or got here as quick as we could. What this statistic means is that we probably think of the mission field as something we send missionaries to deal with overseas, and not something around us.

Last, but not least, if we want to talk about why witnessing is hard for us today, we also need to look at our own movement – our own particular brand of Christianity. Those of you who know the history of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) know that we came along in the height of the Enlightenment – a period in which reason was the primary source of authority and legitimacy. This Enlightenment philosophy deeply influenced Thomas and Alexander Campbell, and the ethos of that reasonable and pragmatic approach ultimately won out over Barton Stone's more spirit-filled, "revival-istic" mindset. But unintentionally, the Enlightenment's emphasis on rationality and control left little room for a God who could make a difference...a God who could respond to prayer...a God who could stir up new initiatives...or a God who could heal people. Coupling that with the notion that religion was a private affair, in which the story of Christianity was unacceptable as a part of social discourse, there was nothing left nothing for Christians to bear witness to. Over time, Disciples

lost the evangelistic fervor which characterized their early years and settled for what they could control. And that is still true today as many “post-modern” Christians (including Disciples) see spirituality as solely a matter of personal decision. “I’ll make my choice; you make yours. Don’t bother me, and I won’t bother you.”

Unfortunately, this means that people – even those of us here this morning - get nervous when someone starts talking about Jesus in public.

So, the fact that we have trouble talking about our faith could be blamed on all the deck is stacked against us, at least from a historical perspective. However, while the obstacles to our witness may have been built a long time ago, we’ve got to break out of these patterns if we want the church to have any longevity or role in society. We have to break these patterns if we believe that Jesus is our Lord and that he calls us to go into the world with a message of good news. If Jesus is Lord and we want our church to make a difference, we have to reset what it means to witness. And one of the ways to do that is to understand what is really being said in our scripture lesson from 1 Peter.

In the midst of a section on righteousness in the face of suffering, Peter suggests there is a particular calling for Christians. *Always be prepared to give a defense for the hope you have.* A defense... When we hear those words, it puts us on the “defensive.” Someone’s accusing us and we need to clear our name, to exonerate ourselves from a challenge to our hope. And while it can be that, Peter also understood it as that and more. It wasn’t just being prepared to defend. It was also having an explanation for your hope, or a witness as to why you have hope. But here’s what I know. However we hear it – defense, witness, explanation - our first thought is that we will have to verbally share our faith. I’m going to have to talk...

For some of us, that isn’t a problem. But, I’m guessing that most of us feel a cold drip run down our backs at this thought. You can give presentations on sales figures

all day long or tell clients hard truths. But this...? It's not that we don't have faith. But this is big and we just don't want to mess it up for someone else...or embarrass ourselves in the process.

The good news from this passage in 1 Peter is that it's not all about what you say. Throughout 1 Peter, when Peter refers to the "hope you have," he understands that to be the whole content of the Christian faith. And the whole content is more than apologetics – more than just arguments for the faith.

Theologian Alan Kreider calls this whole content "question-posing lives." Kreider suggests that New Testament evangelism has two components: incarnation and explanation. "Incarnation" is living hopefully and interestingly. "Explanation" is the verbal articulation that points to God, that serves as our testimony to God's saving grace and life-transforming vision." Just as Jesus was both a living example and a teacher, so, too, witness must be both.

I suspect our reluctance to be evangelistic can be traced, in part, to the reduction of evangelism to "explanation" alone. We think that evangelism means that we're supposed to go around in an unsolicited way telling random people about Jesus. But I think what our scripture calls us to do is to be people prepared to give an account for the hope that is in us. People are supposed to look at us and see our hope (and peace, and faith, and joy, and love) – the "question-posing" qualities – and ask about them. And when they ask, "Why are you like this?" that's when the door has been opened for us to point to Jesus Christ.

This is where the church comes in. The church serves as a focus. It sharpens our focus on the hope that has been poured into us by the Holy Spirit. (Romans 5:5) We gather as the church to support one another in our witness. We pass along the stories of God's faithfulness. We call one another to live differently. We equip each other to

share our faith...with lives that are question-posing. Lives that are both incarnation and explanation.

Imagine what that looks like if we get that right. Maybe this week, one of your neighbors sees you taking a meal to another neighbor who just lost a family member and wonders why. Perhaps a co-worker hears you can't work on Sunday like the others and asks why. Maybe a guest comes into this service one morning and isn't sure he agrees with everything, but because of the welcome he receives and the grace that is evident in the way we worship, he walks away saying, "There's something different about them." Imagine the impact we could have on this community if just those of us here this morning lived these kinds of question-posing lives.

Before five-year-old Mason Motz spoke, he pointed. Before we speak, we point. We live lives that point to the hope we have in Jesus Christ, and, then when the door is opened, we are prepared to say why. And when we do that...there's no way to shut us up!

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