

In a wonderful, long out-of-print book, Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic, famed theologian Reinhold Niebuhr writes of his pastoral experience in 1915: **“I am glad there are only eighteen families in this church. I have been visiting the members for six weeks and haven’t seen all of them yet. Usually I walk past a house two or three times before I summon the courage to go in. I am always very courteously received, so I don’t know exactly why I should not be able to overcome this curious timidity.”** Most of us can identify with his feelings. There is something about sharing our faith, telling our own stories, that is difficult at best.

I have chosen two stories this morning that tell of the dramatic power of God to give us the ability to share with others. One is from the Vacation Bible School lesson for the fifth day, and from the Old Testament is one that brings home the lesson quite vividly.

We begin with the Old Testament story. The city is under siege. This is a tragic story of how bad things can get (2 Kings 6:25-32). It is almost impossible for us to comprehend how things could be so bad that residents would resort to cannibalism. Desperate situations call for desperate measures, and the Prophet Elisha is blamed for the situation. (Is that not what we often do: find someone to blame for the situation we are in. It is certainly not our fault!) The door is barred against the King’s men and Elisha says that by this time tomorrow all will be well. God will redeem.

The story continues with four unlikely heroes, four lepers. They are sitting outside the city gate, begging. There is no hope in their situation, who can give them food when there is no food to give? They reason: if we stay here we will die; if we go into the city we shall also die for there is no food there, either; if we go to the enemy camp we may be killed, but they may also show mercy, and we know they have food. The decision is to go to the enemy camp, to take their chances where at least there is some food. They discover the camp deserted. The enemy is gone and has left all the bounty and food behind. They eat, drink and hide the bounty. They have hit the jackpot!

However, the power of this story is in verse 9. As they enjoy the bounty they realize they have Good News that needs to be shared. *“We are not doing right. This is a day of good news and we are keeping it to ourselves.”* Unexpected heroes go and report all they have found to the King and the word of Elisha comes true. God again redeems and rescues his people. Good news must be shared.

Pentecost is one of the four major feasts of Israel. Everyone wants to be in Jerusalem for the celebration. The city is filled with men and women from all over the world. This is a time of joy and celebration.

We lived in Pasadena and South Pasadena for several years and there is in Pasadena a yearly parade you may have heard about: the Rose Parade. The first year we were there we had to go to downtown Pasadena (the parade route) and see if the stories were true. Did people really camp out on the street over night? Now, we were within walking distance and so off we headed – no worry about parking. And it was true! By noon on the day before the parade the streets were crowded with people staking out their place on the parade route. They had coolers, sleeping bags, chairs, games, radios and televisions, and would be there for the night, rain or moon shine! People from all over the world – you could hear almost every language.

This is the scene in Jerusalem (well, maybe not the sleeping on the streets) but people from all over the known world have converged for the celebration of Pentecost. The disciples, numbering about 120, have gathered and are praying and waiting. They are not sure what their next move will be. They are waiting for direction. Suddenly the room where they have gathered is filled with the Power of the Holy Spirit—the POWER to tell others. They rush out into the streets and begin sharing the good news – each one hearing the power of the Gospel in their own language. The world is forever changed. Timid, scared men and women are now boldly proclaiming the power of God as found in the resurrected Christ. This is a day of Good news. Fisherman Peter is turned into an evangelist and he speaks to the gathered crowds. About 3,000 are added to the church. The power to tell others has come!

The boldness is given to the followers of Jesus to share their story and how Jesus has changed their lives forever. One of the best definitions of evangelism for me is: One beggar telling another beggar where they found bread. I remember hearing stories from the depression years. Houses that would share food were somehow marked so that others coming through the area would know that food was often available here. Now when you think about the greed that is often in our world you wonder why such news would be shared. Why not keep these places to yourself? Because you can't keep good news to yourself, it must be shared.

I believe we have made the telling of our stories too difficult. Classes have been designed to help us tell our stories correctly. There are certain steps that must be followed and we often find it intimidating at best. What if I do it wrong? What if I don't tell it correctly? We become so concerned about how we tell the story and fear that we may do it wrong – we fail to tell it at all.

Michael Green in his book, Evangelism in the Early Church, examines how the early church did evangelism. He examines the many methods that were used by those early Christians to share the good news. He discovered that no one method was used over another. In fact he writes: **“When men have the will to speak of their Lord, they find no shortage of ways in which to do it.”** There are no right or wrong ways. Some may at times be more effective than others but they all work. Don't worry about it, just do it!

For me, one of the most effective ways is sometimes called: Friendship Evangelism. Group Publishing has a program of friendship evangelism. It is simply being a friend. We listen to others and wait upon God to open the door for us to share. But above all we become friends, sharing, encouraging, laughing and crying together. Allow God to use the friendship to open doors to the sharing of the good news. In a way, it is how we build disciples. We interact in lives.

We have all heard stories of evangelism done on planes, trains, etc. The Seattle Times a few months ago had an article about a man who was “evangelized” on a plane trip. He could not wait for the flight to end to get rid of his seat mate. They seemed only concerned with a decision for Christ and nothing about him. Our call is to make disciples and discipleship takes time (did not Jesus take three years to try to form disciples?). We need more than a moment—we need to be willing to invest in a life.

We need to remember that God has an eternity. Seeds planted today may not germinate immediately. Some take longer than others to be the growth process. However, seeds not planted will never germinate. God is able to provide the growth we must be willing to plant the seeds. Thus, we must live out our lives in faith. Often the greatest hindrance to the Gospel is those who profess to believe but who fail to put that belief into action. Michael Green concludes his book with this summary:

In these first two centuries or so of the Church’s existence we find many faults, much that dishonours the name they professed. But we also find an evangelistic zeal and effort, exerted by the whole broad spectrum of the Christian community to bring other people to the feet of their ascended Lord and into the fellowship of his willing servants. This is a permanent reminder of the Church’s first priority. Evangelism is the very life blood of the early Christians: and so we find that “day by day the Lord added to their numbers those whom he was saving.” It could happen again, if the church were prepared to pay the price.

JESUS GIVES US THE POWER TO TELL OTHERS!!!!

Niebuhr, Reinhold, Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic, Harper and Row, SF (p.3)
Green, Michael, Evangelism in the Early Church, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1970 (p.278, 280)