

Stewardship of Talk

Sept 30, 2007

“Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?”

When we think about this question from our baptismal covenant, I suspect that many of us tend to focus on the “example” and shy away from the “word.” Proclaiming the Good News by example seems less demanding, less confrontational, than proclaiming by word. The question embodies the Great Commission given by Jesus to his disciples: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, ... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20). Even in an age of widespread on-line education and visual imagery, it’s hard to imagine teaching without words, and particularly spoken words. But what is it that we should proclaim in a society that is scientifically advanced and culturally diverse? Proclaiming the Good News by word requires that we be able to explain not only what we believe and why, but also why our religious beliefs and practice might be of value to another person.

Proclaiming the Good News by example may seem more comfortable than proclaiming by word, but it is very difficult to do well. Jesus told his disciples, “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). People who observed the early Christians took note of their commitment to one another in love. That love within the early Christian community was a distinctive feature that attracted people whose religious experiences had been very different. It is often said that charity begins at home. So we begin to apply Christ’s love in our homes, and then in our local church. Jesus told his disciples that they would be his witnesses, first in Jerusalem, the familiar center of their religious life; then in Judea, their home country; then in Samaria, outside their usual territory but not far away; and ultimately to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8). We, too, are commissioned to start with the familiar, comfortable surroundings of our homes and church but also to go beyond those surroundings and be witnesses to a world in need. In a few minutes we shall share the Peace of Christ, as we do every Sunday. As you shake hands with your fellow worshipers, you might ask yourself, “What have I done, or what could I do, to show love to this member of the community of faith?”

Early in the book of Acts we find Peter and the other apostles talking to people about their faith in Jesus. When Annas, the high priest, forbade them to speak of Jesus, Peter and John declared, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19-20). Then, referring to the threats of the priests against them, they prayed, “‘And now, Lord, look upon their threats, and grant to thy servants to speak thy word with all boldness’ ... And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness” (Acts 4:29, 31). In today’s lesson Paul commended Timothy for having “made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses” (1 Tim 6:12). The apostles conducted their outreach initially in the temple in Jerusalem and in synagogues throughout the Roman Empire, and most of the people who heard them were religious Jews. The Good News of God in Christ was for them a new way of living within the established traditions of Judaism. The early Gentile Christians came from other religious traditions but accepted the idea that God had come to earth in the person of Jesus.

How should we proclaim the Good News by word in our time and place? We can take an impersonal approach by posting announcements on bulletin boards or web sites or submitting them to local newspapers and the cable channel. We hope that publicizing our regular activities and special events in these ways will create some “buzz” around town, but it’s hard to know whether those messages are being heard amidst the deluge of other messages that people receive daily. And the announcement of a speaker or a musical performance, however well known the speaker or musicians may be, doesn’t really get to the essence of proclaiming the Good News. The Good News of God in Christ is really about relationships among people, and so proclaiming the Good News ultimately requires that we talk to individual people. We don’t necessarily need to go door to door, confronting strangers, as the Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses do, or stand in front of Whole Foods or at the landfill, accosting people as they come and go. In our neighborhoods, or around town, or in our places of work each of us sees many of the same people regularly. How often when two people meet, even in church, each one says, “Hi! How are you?” and each responds, “I’m fine.” Conversation may touch on family activities, the weather, town politics, or workplace issues. Turning a conversation to

spiritual topics can be difficult, because we don't want to seem pushy or moralistic. Proclaiming the Good News in our workplaces or schools can be awkward, and in some places, such as in public schools or government offices, it is restricted or prohibited. But opportunities present themselves, if we are open to them. Sometimes in casual conversation a colleague will reveal an interest in spiritual matters, perhaps in relation to a personal problem or inner conflict. A few words of heartfelt concern at a critical moment may lead to later conversations about matters of faith.

There was a man who worked in my laboratory at Hanscom Air Force Base, with whom I had only occasional interaction, but who always greeted me cordially whenever we met in the hallways. When he asked, "How are you?" I always had the feeling that he genuinely cared about me. There was something spiritual in the way he asked the question. I never discussed religious topics with him, but I felt that he must have a strong religious faith. It was a great loss to the laboratory several years ago when he suffered a fatal heart attack. The laboratory organized a memorial convocation, at which several of his closest associates offered eulogies. They spoke not only about his scientific work and his leadership in the laboratory but also about his religious faith and noted that he was a lay leader in his church. His religious faith evidently empowered him to care deeply about other people, including those with whom he interacted only occasionally. He certainly proclaimed the Good News by example, and he probably proclaimed the Good News by word as he found opportunity.

Some people seem to have a particular gift for proclaiming the Good News by word. My father was one of them. He had an almost uncanny ability to steer a conversation toward topics of faith and belief, even when talking with people whom he did not know well. That ability was undoubtedly a product of his own Christian faith, which was well formed and deeply rooted. My father sometimes described people as either having had or not having had what he called a "real Christian experience." His use of that phrase always brought to my mind the conversion of Saul on the road to Damascus. I was never sure exactly what my father counted as his "real Christian experience," but I hesitated to ask him. It seemed too personal. As I grew up I was deeply involved in church activities, attended a week-long Bible conference camp for several summers during my high school years, and was active with Christian groups in

college and graduate school, but I was never sure that any of my religious experiences, or even the totality of them, attained the level of my father's "real Christian experience." After he passed away I asked my mother about it, and she thought that he attributed his deep spiritual commitment to an evangelist who had visited his home church when he was in high school.

Let's think again about Peter's and John's declaration to the high priest: "We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard." Peter and John and the other disciples certainly had a "real Christian experience." Spending three years walking around with Jesus is as real as it gets. What did they see and hear? When John the Baptist sent two of his disciples to ask if Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus told them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them" (Luke 7:22). Those words are reflected in the words of our first hymn: "Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord ... Proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight, the hungry fed, the humble lifted up" (Hymn 438).

What have we seen and heard that we can proclaim to others? Every Sunday we hear the lessons, the music, the sermon, and the prayers, and we share the Holy Eucharist. We see the natural beauty of our surroundings and the symbols of our faith. But most important, we see one another. In this place we come together every week as a community of faith, and here we have a special opportunity to support one another in Christian love. But the community of faith, as I suggested previously, is not defined or limited by this building. Beyond these walls we have seen homeless people fed on Boston Common, victims of natural disasters receive help in Indonesia and in Waveland, Mississippi, and poor people in El Salvador enabled to receive improved medical care. We don't need to see a burning bush, like Moses in the wilderness, or hear a voice in the night, like the prophet Samuel in the temple, or see a flash of light from the sky, like Saul on the road to Damascus. We have much to proclaim to the people we meet! May we, like Peter and John, speak the word of God with boldness!