

# Wading River Congregational Church

## SERMONS IN PRINT

SUMMER 2010 'ASK THE PASTOR SERIES'

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### 1 Peter 3:8-17 "Sharing The Faith"

We begin this summer's *Ask the Pastor* series with the question: "How aggressive does a Christian need to be in spreading the Word to others and professing his/her faith?"

Let us start by stipulating that all Christians are expected to share the faith. Jesus' commands are the foundation: "Go and make disciples of all nations;" "You will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth." The commands were given to the Twelve, but accepted and acted on by all the first generation Christians. This is not something "to leave to the professionals."

As for "aggressive" evangelism, it's instructive to see how the early Christians dealt with their mandate. Certainly in Peter, Stephen and especially Paul (!) we find aggressive language and strong determination to get their point across. But that was only one way the "good news" was shared.

#### 1) The Early Christian Church

From Pentecost onward, Peter was ready to stand up and proclaim the story of Jesus when the situation called for it. Whether people were confused over the Christians' actions, or trying to inhibit them, Peter took them on. "You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead... and we are all witnesses of these things." "Repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins." Or

Stephen: "You stiff-necked people... you always resist the Holy Spirit."

They resisted orders to be quiet about Jesus: "judge for yourselves... should we obey you rather than God? We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard." They were flogged but went right back to their "witnessing" and counted it "joy to suffer disgrace for the Name." They confronted lies and deception within the Christian community. In all this, you could certainly call them "aggressive."

But they also acted and spoke with grace and kindness. They cared for one another, shared their goods, and there were "no needy among them." They carried out acts of kindness and healing "in Jesus' name." And they forgave their enemies: as he was stoned to death, the last words of Stephen - the first Christian martyr - were "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." A Pharisee named Saul, who oversaw the stoning, heard what Stephen prayed.

Finally, ordinary Christians quite naturally took the good news of Jesus wherever they went: to Samaria, down to Gaza, up the Phoenician coast to cities like Antioch. Inside a decade there were Christian communities all over Palestine, all over the Roman province of Syria.

A mixture of Spirit-inspired strong words, soft hearts, signs and wonders, communal commitments, deep conviction about Jesus'

“victory over death,” made their spreading the gospel in the mid-1<sup>st</sup> C. the most effective outreach ever.

## 2) *Sharing The Gospel Today*

How should we do it? I can think of five ways to “spread the Word” and “confess our faith.” You can probably think of others.

The first is *to testify* – that is, to speak of our own experience of faith. Our experience is not itself “the gospel;” it is the result of our hearing and embracing the gospel. What has it done for us? Now there are many ways to tell the story, and only rarely will anyone ask to hear our whole life-history! But there are many ways of testifying to our faith.

Maybe it’s as simple as telling a friend “I/we will be praying for you.” Maybe it’s the moment in conversation when we say “Well, that is in God’s hands and I’m not going to worry about it.” Maybe it’s along the line of “I used to think that way, but I have come to see it differently...” Someone said to me about their difficult marriage “I guess God put us together for a reason.”

This kind of remark is not aggressive; rather it’s a statement that we rely on God, and in testifying to that, we also seek to arouse curiosity in the hearer. But sometimes a deeper friendship, or a crisis situation, can prompt us to go further, so that we can say “As a Christian, I have learned...” That may evoke a negative response; a “that’s ok for you, but...” At that point, it’s probably better to say no more, rather than get into an argument.

The second way to share the faith is to *share what the Bible says* – this is the gospel; our experience of it is something else. The gospel is true, even when our experience of it is confused. Sometimes this can mean giving someone a Bible as a gift. Not that millions of

Americans don’t already own one, but a new, modern, simple language one can mean a new openness to read it. The circumstances of a person’s life can sometimes make them hungry to “hear a word from God,” especially if they are lonely, in trouble, very sick. Thank God for the work of people like *The Gideons* in placing Bibles and New Testaments in many needy places. We could take that on ourselves too – I have a small pile of small New Testaments on my desk, and over a year several of them are taken, or accepted, by visitors.

The Bible speaks for itself, but there are times when we can speak for it – for example, if someone is disparaging the New Testament accounts, we may be called to graciously defend them. And there are also moments when we need to have in our heads some brief statement of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul summarized it once as “*Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, he was buried, and he was raised on the third day... and appeared to many people.*” You and I might want to be more interpretive than historical: “*Jesus laid down his life for us, but God raised him to a great victory over death, and promised the same to anyone who trusts themselves to him.*” There are many ways of speaking about Jesus which blend the Bible with our experience – “*He hears my prayers and goes with me every day; I know he’s still alive, as the Bible says.*”

Thirdly, we can share the gospel by *servicing in Jesus’ name*. The Apostles Peter and John were first called to appear before the Sanhedrin over a healing: “*If we are being called to account for an act of kindness... then know it was by the name of Jesus.*” We are told to do good in Jesus’ name, and that does not require talking until the time comes to answer the question “Why are you doing this for me?” That may take a long time, or never come, but we are still witnessing to our faith

in Jesus Christ and commending the gospel by our actions.

Fourthly, we can *take a stand* on some ethical or philosophical issue. It can be a very quiet stand – being the only person in the room to vote against a decision that as a Christian we cannot support – or a more public stand, where a moral issue is at stake that must be defended. We all have to decide what those crucial issues are, but there are moments in life when we must stand up and be counted if we are part of “God’s people” – not out of arrogance, but because we cannot be quiet in the face of major injustice.

Finally, we can *invite someone in* to the Christian community. There are many doors to the church these days, and we can all find ways to invite friends and family to share in celebratory events, come to a band show, “let’s go take a look around the Thrift Store;” “I wonder if your children would enjoy Vacation Bible School?” Christian community is potentially the strongest attraction for unbelievers today, meeting the buried desire of many people to be part of a loving, caring group.

So after our friend makes a visit or two to the Thrift, or to a band show, and meets some friendly people, the opportunity is there to hand them a bulletin or a newsletter or a brochure, or to invite them to worship with us. Then we can leave the Spirit to speak to them as he has to us – through hymns and prayers and Scriptures and sermons, and most of all through welcoming and gracious people!

Does any of this require *aggression*? I would think very rarely. More needed is *graciousness*; the response of people who have *known grace*. Some Christians in our society make the “culture wars” un-winnable for anyone by inciting passions and using provocative and aggressive language, and

never show grace. We hear all that they are against, and nothing that they are for. That is unlikely to win anyone to Christ. If you substitute for “aggressive,” words like “determined, intentional, courageous, considerate” – overall, “*gracious*” – I would agree that we all ought to be spreading the word and professing our faith more actively than we do.

“*Witnesses*” are people who can speak confidently of what they have seen and heard and know. The word for this in Greek is ‘*martyrs*,’ and it came by the mid-1<sup>st</sup> C. to also mean “someone who suffered or died for their faith” – a *martyr*. So sharing our faith, in whatever way, can be costly; but the act of sharing can also *strengthen* our faith more than we can imagine. Like someone who learns by teaching, people who defend or share their faith discover what they truly believe, and how important it is to them.

Pray then that we will all be *good and true witnesses* to Jesus Christ.

Let us pray...