

SAYING AND DOING

Psalm 97
Acts 16:16-34

Faith Community
May 20, 2007

Introduction

How do we tell the good news of our faith?

It's the middle of the afternoon on a beautiful Saturday and the doorbell rings. Two young men dressed in black are at the door and they each have a Bible. They hand you a tract and try to talk to you about your faith. You tell them that you are a Christian and you are active in your church. You try to say good-bye, but they won't hear of it. They continue until you're afraid you will have to be rude to get them to leave. The impression they leave with you is not altogether good.

Sheila went to the door once when some of these men arrived at our house. She told them she was the minister's wife at the Presbyterian Church, and it didn't even faze them. They went right on with their message. This kind of witnessing can become obnoxious.

Just last week a priest told me he went to the door when a couple of these men stopped by. He had on his clerical collar when he opened the door. They looked at him and said, "Are you saved?"

At some point this way of speaking becomes counterproductive – you do more harm to your cause than good.

Should we then be silent? Should we not reach out to people? For most of my ministry the church has waited for people to come to them, rather than actively inviting people. If someone visited church, then they *might* receive a follow-up call. I remember a woman I called a couple of years ago who had been visiting all the protestant church's in the area. When I called after her visit here, she said was the first pastor to follow up with a phone call.

We haven't done a very good job of telling the good news, let alone responding to those who show some interest our faith.

I

Sometimes, speaking is the most effective way to communicate. Last week we looked at the way Paul talked with Lydia and changed her life. He told her the good news of Jesus, and she heard him clearly. She must have asked lots of questions and discussed several issues with him, and in the end, she committed her life. Paul was very effective in communicating the good news to Lydia.

This kind of speaking is often called "witnessing" or one-to-one talk about our faith. At a basic level it is telling about your faith and letting others know what it means to you. It can be as simple as saying, "When I was so sick I really found it helpful to raise my concern in the prayers at church. I knew dozens of people were praying for me. It really made a difference."

This statement says a lot to people: I take my concerns to God in prayer; the church is a supportive group of people who believe like I do and care about me; being part of the community of God's people makes a big difference; and I trust in a power beyond myself – God.

A simple statement can carry a powerful message.

Missionaries are a clear example of speaking the gospel. They talk with people about Jesus and his message – often to people who have never heard of him. They get people together who respond to their message and begin to form a church, even if it meets in somebody's home at first. Then they train local people to be leaders for the church and begin to govern themselves in their church. Ideally, the missionaries begin by planting a few seeds, and over the years a large forest grows.

We speak the good news because Jesus told us to. In what is known as the Great Commission, Jesus said, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

II

Another effective way of telling the good news is by our actions. Sometimes the saying is true, “Actions speak louder than words.” In today's scripture Paul says very little – it's what he does that makes a difference. Paul has been beaten and then locked in prison – in the innermost cell, with his feet in shackles. An enormous earthquake suddenly breaks open the jail and the shackles, so that Paul is now free. When the jailer sees what has happened, he is ready to kill himself. The penalty for allowing inmates to get free is death. But after seeing this Paul says, “Don't harm yourself, we're all here!”

They didn't escape when they could have. Through Paul's actions, one who could not have been reached now wants to know what Paul stands for. Often our actions are as important as what we say. Any parent knows that's true.

Our church has acted through mission trips, among other things. Whether we were rebuilding homes after a hurricane, building beds for a women's shelter, helping to construct a new church, or providing medical help, we were sending a message to people about what we believe. In all of these instances someone would ask, “Who are these people?” They are Christians from the United States. “And what are they doing here?” They've come to help.

These actions make a clear statement about what Christianity is about. People who see Christian actions understand a big part of what Jesus taught. Jesus told us that even when we offer a cool drink of water to one who is thirsty, we are doing God's will.

We are only doing what Christ called us to do. But a side benefit of that is that people learn about Christianity.

III

The most effective way to spread the good news is through words and actions. Most of the time, it isn't enough only to speak. Words without actions can ring hollow, and usually it isn't

enough only to act without some conversation. Paul is a great example because he spoke powerful words – like those he spoke to Lydia, and he made a difference through how he acted. Because Paul acted boldly, he was able to contact people he couldn't have otherwise. As the Bible says, "Faith without works is dead." And on the other hand, actions without words can be misunderstood.

Conclusion

When we were on the mission trip to Poland, we often met with the Polish leaders in the evening to discuss the project. Toward the end of our trip, one of the Polish leaders said something that surprised us. He said, "You have come to work with us and you have treated all of us as equals. You haven't treated some of us better than others, but we haven't done the same among ourselves. In our culture some are looked down upon or considered not as good. You have seen us all as equals, and that has taught us that we must do the same. Thank you for opening our eyes to this."

We didn't know we had done anything, but it was helpful to our Polish co-workers. They changed the way they interacted with each other. Our actions were important – even if unknown to us – and it was also important that we talked about it so that we all understood.

Our actions are important. What we say is important. Both are necessary to communicate the good news effectively.

Amen