

Presenting a Winsome Witness: It All Starts with "No"

John 14: 15-21, Acts 17: 22-31

April 27, 2008

I've got some big shoes to fill this week. Wasn't Trish's witness great last week? I don't think I've ever heard such a long ovation for a minister before. We are truly blessed. Thanks to Lance for substituting as co-celebrant this Sunday as Jerry is out of town for a family reunion. Trish is in Fort Worth for General Conference. I will be headed to Fort Worth as well right after worship today. Next Sunday we will have Reverend Bill Taylor in the pulpit, straight from Fort Worth where he is serving as delegate from our Annual Conference at General Conference. I feel like the peanut butter between two great slices of the bread of life. Two winsome witnesses indeed!

This morning I will preach the last of an evangelism series I have entitled, "Presenting a Winsome Witness." We have looked at many texts from the book of Acts and the Gospels. I have suggested that the church of Jesus Christ is always only one to two generations from extinction. I have compared our evangelistic witness to sales with the help of Lary Barton. We have looked at this analogy through the activities of understanding the seeker's need, devising a solution, and using all of our resources within the church family.

Today is the acid test for what we do when we witness to our faith. Our witness really starts when the seeker says, "No!" I want to explore how we handle the various objections that people may present to the Christian faith. You may recall

from my first sermon in this series a month ago that I usually only address a segment on our congregation in each of my sermons. I may not speak to everyone every week. For this series I have spoken very intentionally to you who are uncomfortable with this comparison between sales and faith witness. I have spoken to you who are uncomfortable with faith witnessing as a kind of button-holing that is especially outdated in a pluralistic world. I have spoken to those who lack confidence or who are genuinely shy. I haven't even spoken those who are like me, sensitive by nature and afraid of rejection. Today I want to tackle head on the hard reality of baring your soul to someone who then does not follow your invitation. What do you do?

Let me up front with my main point this morning: ***There is nothing to fear. It all starts with "no." "No" is the door through which you invite the Holy Spirit to enter.*** Say this with me: ***There is nothing to fear. It all starts with "no." "No" is the door through which you invite the Holy Spirit to enter.*** Now you may not believe or even understand what I am saying, so let's say it one more time (repeat). Hopefully later this morning you'll not only understand what I am saying. You'll believe it.

I want to look in a little more detail at two of our texts from today's lectionary – from the gospel of John and the book of Acts. Fear filled the upper room as Jesus speaks to the disciples on the night that he was betrayed and arrested. Jesus says repeatedly in many ways “do not be afraid.” Then in our brief passage from John he says he will send a *paraclete*. Some translations render that word as

helper, some as counselor. The truth is that we cannot do it justice in a single English word. The best phrase for it is “one who is called in.” This would apply to a witness for the defense in an unjust murder trial or a soldier to save people in a time of chaos in an attack on civilians. It is a dramatic word. Who does the calling? Jesus? You and me? Both are correct. We invoke the Spirit in Holy Communion. This past week we invoked the Spirit in the burning of incense at our evening prayer services. But you can do it in your prayer time at any time. When was the last time that you asked the Spirit to come down into your heart in a time of crisis or difficulty? There is nothing to fear. The *paraclete* is the one who we invite in.

I am not sure Paul felt fear on that day he was in Athens in our text from the Book of Acts. He should have. This in many ways was hostile territory. It was said that there were more gods in Athens than there were people. Talk about pluralistic society. Paul goes not to the town square but to Aeropagus. This is a hill in Athens that was the seat of the court system, particularly for the criminal bench. They were not only really smart people, but also very powerful people. The dominant philosophers, the smart guys he encountered, were Epicureans and Stoics. Epicureans are not guys who eat rich foods. The aim of their religion was *ataraxia* (not to be confused with Anorexia), which means serenity or tranquility. It's how you achieve this as an epicurean that's interesting. They believed that the gods were unconcerned with humanity and irrelevant to the human experience. To achieve serenity you just had to overcome your fear of the gods. They also did not believe in an afterlife. After you died, your soul returned to an atomic state. So your life aim was to become detached from the anxieties of terror, fear, and the pain and

loss of property and life. What religion does this sound a little like today? That's right – Buddhism. The Stoics were the dominant philosophy in Greece. The chief aim of the stoic is virtue. The ideal state was the elevation of wisdom, justice, and love. They also believed in fate, not blind fate but that the divine providence of the gods ruled the circumstances of your life. The gods were actually interested in you. Your job was to surrender your will to the larger divine will of the natural world. The final state of society was both egalitarian and totally inclusive. I think if we lived in Athens back in those days most of us would have been Stoics. The Apostle Paul was heavily influenced by the Stoics and speaks more directly to them in his passage this morning from Acts. In this city of more gods than people he addresses this unknown god. He goes through this small opening that they don't understand. He appeals to the Stoics ideal of a providential god who cares for the creation. He also appeals to the epicurean who could not possibly do anything to please or fear god. He even quotes the Stoic philosopher who claims it is through the gods that we have our being. He comes back to the judicial seat in which they stand where a god (just like Aries) was judged and they will be judged. But when he suggests the judge is Jesus who was resurrected from the dead he pretty much loses them. So most of them walk off that day laughing, but two are converted, a woman named Damaris and a influential man named Dionysius who some believe became the first bishop of Athens. But most said "no." I suspect as the text claims that they came back with many objections. It all starts with "no."

So objections are our friends when dealing in our wonderfully pluralistic world. What objections can you expect? I want to suggest three general types of

objections that you will have to deal with every time. **The first objection that I always have to deal with is the one in my head!** You're not good enough...you're not smart enough...you don't have anything that people would possibly want to hear...remember these words of Jesus: "I won't leave you orphaned. I will come back to you...I am in God and you are in me and I am in you." That's a very good word. Replace the old tapes with the new tapes. Breathe out the words of isolation. Because Christ lives, Christ lives in me!

The second objection is also in my head, but it seems to be directed from the one who states the objection.In my head it says, "I am stating an objection, and it is a personal attack against you!" In reality it is not an objection that denies you as a person. It may ultimately deny what you believe and that's o.k. That's God's business. We plant and God provides the growth. No does not always mean no forever! Handling objections is a skill that every salesperson has to learn. Lary Barton has learned the lesson well and let's now hear his witness on this matter... No is the "entrée." It is the door through which we enter with the Holy Spirit into the holy activity of faith-sharing.

The third objection is really one implicit in any objection you will get...it is what Jesus heard all the time...it is probably what Paul heard...**"by what authority and power do you claim what you claim?"** It is by the authority and power of the Holy Spirit that you make any claim in faith. Now you may have your logic like Paul had. You may have your facts. You may have charm and wit and a winsome witness. But when you spend time in prayer and in asking the Holy Spirit to come into a

situation, the Holy Spirit will come. When it happens with power, it is to be almost in a trance-like state in which the words and ideas that come into your head are as if a fire hose has been piped into your brain and the words and ideas are no longer your own. This happened to me this past week in a phone conversation with my dad. My dad is a Presbyterian and he is in a Bible study in which the topic of predestination was discussed. He is deeply bothered by this notion because of his view of God's gift of free will to all people to choose or reject God. I said, "Dad, I hear you. That's why I am a Methodist." But he wanted to hear more about the argument against predestination. So we looked at the Bible texts that mention predestination and I gave my interpretations of those and I felt like I was in a trance. The words and ideas were not my own and I don't think I could even repeat them to you today.

Have you had a trance-like experience of the Spirit? Have you invited her in? Have you experienced words that come to your lips that are not your own? Paul did? I have. You can too. I want to share one more trance-like experience with you from the great mystic, Julian of Norwich. Julian was perhaps the first woman published in the English language, all the way back to the 14th century. She was the first mystic to insist that God was both mother and father. She has divine revelations of Jesus. She writes of an encounter with Christ in his passion. Christ, near death says just to her: "Are you well-pleased that I have suffered for you?" Yes, she replies. "I would have suffered more for you if I could. It is an endless source of joy and delight and happiness that I have been able to suffer for you. I would have suffered all the more just for you!" What good news she reports of her Jesus! As she had these powerful visions I ask "how could she have ever kept these things to

herself? When we share our witness, even when we encounter objections, can we ask ourselves, “how could we ever keep this good news only to ourselves?”