

## **Do Tell!**

A sermon on 1 Corinthians 9:16-23  
Presented to Hodges Presbyterian Church  
On 5 February 2012  
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### **1 Corinthians 9:16-23 (NRSV)**

<sup>16</sup> If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel!

<sup>17</sup> For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward; but if not of my own will, I am entrusted with a commission.

<sup>18</sup> What then is my reward? Just this: that in my proclamation I may make the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my rights in the gospel.

<sup>19</sup> For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them.

<sup>20</sup> To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law.

<sup>21</sup> To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law.

<sup>22</sup> To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.

<sup>23</sup> I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.

One Sunday a little boy returned home from his first Sunday school class. His mother asked him, "Who was your teacher?" and the little boy answered, "I don't remember her name, but she must have been Jesus' grandmother because she didn't talk about anyone else."

How many of you are grandparents? Do you remember when your first grandchild was born? What did you talk about? Who did you tell? How did you feel about your grandchild? I used to work in a photography lab, and one of the photographers got so sick of hearing about a co-worker's grandchildren, and worse yet, having to look at endless snapshots of the little ... uh ... tykes. This is a true story. I'm not making this up. He finally went into the studio and took a dozen different shots of a can of spray furniture polish and a bottle of dishwashing detergent. The next time Pat

pulled out a stack of snapshots of her grandkids, he planned to ask her if she wanted to see some pictures of *his* Pride and Joy.

Our Scripture lesson from 1 Corinthians today gives us a picture of the Apostle Paul. Let's take a look at it. First, Paul says, "An obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel!" There's a little bit of irony here, because the Greek phrase translated "woe to me" was a very common expression that someone would utter when they received bad news, and, of course, gospel is a translation of the Greek word for good news. Paul is implying that it is bad news for him if he doesn't preach the good news of Jesus Christ! In the last few weeks, we've been talking about how God calls a prophet and the consequences if the prophet denies God's call to speak. Here, Paul is simply reiterating that idea. He is called to preach the good news, and woe to him if he doesn't live up to that calling.

In this passage, Paul is speaking about his rights as an Apostle. The church in Corinth was a church with a lot of problems among the members. One of the biggest problems they had was a spiritual pride. They believed that they were a group of mature Christians who were free to eat meat offered to idols if they liked. Their Christian freedom gave them--so they thought --a special position in which they could do things that might not be permissible to lesser men. Paul's way of answering that argument is to set forth the many privileges which he himself had a perfect right to claim, but which he did not claim in case they should turn out to be stumbling-blocks to others and hindrances to the effectiveness of the gospel.

The whole passage from 1 Corinthians this morning centers on just that idea. Paul refuses to do anything that would compromise the effectiveness of his mission

to spread the gospel. What passion he must have had for evangelism! Everywhere Paul went, he shared the good news of Jesus Christ. He shared it with his jailers in the Roman prison. He shared it with the Roman governor while on trial for his life. He shared it with crowds at the market place and in the synagogues. He shared it with the philosophers on Mars Hill. He shared it with people in their homes. There was virtually no place that Paul ever went that he did not share the good news – the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul was commanded to preach the gospel, and he took the command seriously. In this passage, Paul gives an outline for his whole concept of his ministry. First of all, Paul considered his ministry a privilege. His reward was to be able to offer the gospel free of charge. Secondly, Paul regarded his ministry as a duty. If he had chosen to be a preacher of the gospel he might quite legitimately have demanded payment for his work. But he had not chosen the work; it had chosen him. He could no more stop doing it than he could stop breathing; and there could, therefore, be no question of payment.

Paul worked hard to make sure that his presentation of the gospel was understood and received. He even altered his behavior and his manners so that he would fit in with the people to whom he was witnessing. Listen again to what he said:

<sup>19</sup> For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them.

<sup>20</sup> To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law.

<sup>21</sup> To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law.

<sup>22</sup> To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all

things to all people, that I might by all means save some.

<sup>23</sup> I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.

Some people would say that Paul was being a hypocrite, being one thing to one person and something else to another. But it wasn't that. It was more that Paul was able to put himself in the same environment as the person he was witnessing to. He showed the person that the Christian life was not a foreign lifestyle, but that it was compatible with the life that the person already knew. Yes, there is a transformation associated with becoming a Christian, but to hear the good news and to accept it is the beginning of that transformation, and it can come to any of us right where we are in life. The man who can never see anything but his own point of view and who never makes any attempt to understand the mind and heart of others, will never make a pastor or an evangelist or even a friend. Paul went out of his way to not only see that other point of view but to let the person he was sharing with know that he saw it. Paul let the person know that Christ was available to him, right in the middle of his life's circumstances.

And why did Paul do all this? He did it because he had experienced the power of the Risen Lord in his own life. Paul was filled with a joy and a love of Jesus that was just too great to be contained within one person.

I'm sure you've all experienced a minor plumbing disaster in your lives. Did you ever stop up the drain in the bathtub and begin to draw a bath, but somehow, you got distracted and left the water on too long? Water poured into the bathtub and kept coming and coming. The water level kept rising and rising. Maybe there was an overflow drain, but you had turned the volume of the water just too fast, and the drain couldn't keep up with the fill. What happened? Pretty soon, the tub couldn't hold all the water, and the water just had to overflow. That's what happened to Paul. Paul was the

bathhtub and the joy and power of the gospel was the water that was just too much for the tub to hold. Paul was forced to let the Spirit overflow into his surroundings.

Sharing the good news of the gospel was Paul's special calling. He was commanded by God to share the gospel message and spread the faith of Christianity throughout the known world of his day. But while his calling was special, the essence of his calling was not unique. Each and every Christian, every person who has had a personal encounter with our Risen Lord, is given much the same calling. We are all commanded to tell others about our Savior who has come to us, who has affected our lives, who has made us whole, who is even now working His transforming will in our lives as we travel the road of sanctification.

A theologian once said that when the Bible says something once, it may be simple narrative, but when it says something twice, it is important and you need to pay attention. Each of the four gospels has a passage that captures the essence of that command. The command is called the "Great Commission," and it is found in the final chapter of each of the four gospels. In Matthew 28:18-20, it says:

<sup>18</sup> And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

<sup>19</sup> Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

<sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

In Mark 16:15-16:

<sup>15</sup> And he said to them, "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.

<sup>16</sup> The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned.

In the narrative written by Luke, the command comes in the first chapter of Acts rather than in the gospel itself. In Acts 1:8 we see:

<sup>8</sup> But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

And finally in John 20:21-23

<sup>21</sup> Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

<sup>22</sup> When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.

<sup>23</sup> If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

In each of the gospel narratives, the disciples are commanded to go out in power and witness to the world for Christ. That is a command that extends to each and every one of us who profess to follow Christ. How well do we do obeying that command?

Rev. Richard Fairchild of the United Church of Canada, wrote of a conference he attended.

Many years ago now I attended a meeting in Moncton, New Brunswick where people had gathered to talk about evangelism and church growth.

Of the twenty people present, only about half of them were interested in the topic - this though the entire group of people represented some of the most important leaders in the church in that region. More alarming yet, the concern for evangelism expressed by this half of the group did not translate into action.

Of the 10 who were concerned about spreading the good news of Jesus Christ, only five had engaged in one of the simplest, but most effective forms of

evangelism known: only five of them had invited a friend to church in the previous three months.

Further, only one person in the entire group had shared her faith in Jesus with someone else. Only one out of twenty church leaders at a meeting concerned with how to tell others about Jesus had actually told someone else within the previous few years that Jesus was her personal source of forgiveness and hope and strength.

I found, and I still find, that incredible!

What is wrong with us that we are so reluctant to tell the stories of Jesus? Why don't we witness to others about what we believe? You don't have to answer this out loud unless you want to, but how many of us here in this room have taken the opportunity to tell even one other person in the last week about our faith in Jesus? In the last month? In the last year? Ever?

What is evangelism? The great Reformed preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon gave the analogy that evangelism is simply "one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread." There's a story of a small dog that had been hit by a car and was lying by the side of a road. A veterinarian, driving by, noticed the dog, stopped and picked it up, and took it to his office. There, he discovered that the dog had been stunned, had suffered a few minor cuts and bruises but was otherwise all right. He revived the dog and patched it up and was carrying the dog out to the kennels when the dog jumped from his arms and disappeared into the night. "What an ungrateful little dog," the vet thought to himself. He put the incident out of his mind until the next

evening when he heard a scratching at the door. When he opened it, there was the little dog he had treated with another hurt dog.

That is what evangelism should be for us, but it rarely is. The mainline denominational churches, Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, and even Southern Baptists seem to be on the decline. The number of new members in a particular church may be rising, but the vast majority of them are the result of membership transfers or of children being baptized and confirmed. The number of new adult or youth converts in most of our churches is dismally small, and this is exactly the time when we should be seeing people coming to Christ in mass numbers.

In 2003, the Vatican released a report on the occult and New Age movement. In part, the report stated there is a "genuine yearning for a deeper spirituality, for something which will touch their hearts, and for a way of making sense of a confusing and often alienating world." People are turning to the Occult and away from organized religion. "Many people, the report acknowledges, have rejected organized religion because they feel it fails to answer their needs."

Why do people feel this way? Could it be because we, the church, have ignored their needs? Could we be so concerned with our social events and our bake sales and our building funds and our day to day business of running the church that we have lost sight of our calling as Christians? Have we forgotten the good news that we are supposed to be sharing? Is there so little interest in our message because we have so little interest in it ourselves?

Sometimes, I think that our faith is like a frozen TV dinner. It looks right. It's nourishing. But something is lacking. It is never going to be the same as a fresh

cooked meal. We're all Presbyterians here – part of the Reformed Tradition – Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, etc. Those denominations all have the reputation of being stiff and formal. We all believe that we have been chosen by Christ to be His followers, but we believe that everything must be done “decently and in order.” That's not bad in and of itself, but when it is carried to an extreme, it leads to the description that many have applied to those denominations as the frozen chosen. Just like the TV dinner, there is something missing.

On his April 2, 1979, radio broadcast, Paul Harvey, amazement in his voice, reported that Romeo Bitencourt of Porto Alegre, Brazil, had just been granted a divorce.

Romeo was a Brazilian farmer.

He was ninety years old, had been married sixty-five years, had twelve children, fifty grandchildren, and thirty-six great-grandchildren.

The reason given for the divorce?

“Incompatibility.”

I believe that story tells us something about our walk with Christ, too. Romeo didn't start out incompatible with his wife. It's obvious that their marriage started out happy. You don't have twelve children if there isn't some fire of passion in your marriage. But Romeo and his wife almost certainly fell into the trap that many married couples do. They began to take each other for granted. They allowed other interests to come between them and eventually, they drifted away from each other. They didn't notice it for a long time, but gradually, the awareness made itself known that they

were no longer in love with each other. They had just been living as roommates rather than husband and wife. The fire, the passion was gone, and there was nothing there anymore to hold them together.

Is that the way it is between us and Christ? Have we become complacent and then incompatible with our Lord? Have we forgotten the joy and the energy that we knew when we first came to Christ?

What can we do? Can we regain that enthusiasm that we once had? I believe that it is possible. One of the best ways to remind ourselves of what we discovered when we came to Christ is to see the same awakening in other people. I believe that one way that we can get back in touch with Christ in our own lives is through sharing Christ with our neighbors, our friends, our coworkers and everyone we come into contact with.

Mark Mittelberg, director of evangelism at Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago points out that there are different methods of sharing our faith for each personality type. There are at least six different methods, as demonstrated by six different people in the New Testament.

There's Peter's confrontational approach – direct, bold and to the point.

There's Paul's Intellectual approach – what we talked about today. He could be all things to all people, reasoning from the scriptures in whatever way that his listener could best understand and follow.

There's The Blind Man Testimonial approach – do you remember the story in John 9 where Jesus gave sight to the man who was born blind? The blind man

didn't argue theology. All he said was "One thing I know: I once was blind and now I see."

There's the Samaritan woman's invitational approach – She went into the village and told the people "come and hear the man who told me everything I ever did."

There's Matthew's interpersonal approach – He put on a big banquet for his fellow tax collectors in an effort to expose them to Jesus. He relied on relationships he had built and sought to grow closer in friendship by inviting them into his house and using that friendship for evangelism.

Finally, there's Dorcas' service approach – In Acts 9, we meet a woman who witnessed by serving others, making clothes for the needy and helping the poor.

However we witness for Christ, I believe we'll find that when we do, when we do his work and focus on him, we will find that our passion – our love and joy at His presence in our lives continues to build. If we continue to make Christ the focus of our lives, eventually He will take the place in our hearts that the new grandbaby holds in the heart of his grandmother. We will be so filled with the joy of Christ that we can't hold it in. We just have to tell everyone about our true pride and joy – Jesus Christ.

Let us pray: Dear Lord Jesus, we have all let our passion for you grow cold. Even the most committed of us fails on a daily basis to proclaim your good news to the world around us. Send us your Holy Spirit, we pray, to inspire us and to empower us to love you with every fiber of our being. Like that bathtub with the stopper in the drain and the running tap, fill us with your love and joy and peace until we can no longer hold any more, and it has to run over the top. We ask this in your precious and powerful name, Amen.