

Contagious – Three Stories

July 26, 2009

Mark Statler, Pastor of Discipleship and Missions

Last week, we kicked off a series we called “contagious”. We’re looking at “contagious” in a positive way. If we are followers of Jesus, then he is expecting us – I think even more than that, His Spirit puts a desire in us – to be contagious with hope, love, joy, forgiveness – letting our light shine so that others can experience the amazing love of God that we have found in Jesus.

It’s pretty clear in the New Testament that Jesus focused his energy on people who were not connected to God.. When you look at who Jesus purposefully went to with the good news of God’s love for them, it was not the church people. He poured his energy toward people who were on the outside. God sent Jesus to seek and save the lost – people who had wandered away from God in one way or another. That was his mission so it better be our mission too.

Last week Aaron talked about some body parts we need to use to share God’s love with others; our hearts (filled with compassion for people like God’s heart is); our feet to take us where people are; and our hands to serve them and put God’s love into action. Today we are going to talk about another part of our bodies we need to use to share the good news of Jesus with others – our mouths!

So how do we use our words to share our faith with others? As you probably know, there are some strongly negative examples out there! A few years ago, Jennifer and I spent a night at the Plaza in Kansas City. As we were walking the Plaza the next day, a small group of people set up a street corner soapbox to tell everyone that walked by they were on a highway to hell. I guess that’s one way to tell others about Jesus. I have to say that I didn’t like that they were yelling – at me! I guess their assumption was that if you are on the Country Club Plaza in KC, then you must not love Jesus. I had an urge to confront them and ask them in the name of Jesus to stop. But I figured that was a waste of time, so I didn’t do that. Instead, I walked away embarrassed that God’s love and concern for all people was turned into scaring and guilt people to come to God.

Now you know that when we talk about using words to share our faith, we are not talking about soapbox preaching, right? I’m also not asking you to go cold-calling; knocking on people’s door that you don’t know and getting them to say a salvation prayer. Maybe you have experienced that at your door. I know I have, and even though I know that those are not the only ways to share my faith with words, they are images and experiences that make me fearful of getting into conversations about my faith, because I think, “what if ____ thinks I have an ulterior motive to being his friend? What if it offends and becomes this awkward thing between us?”

It is possible to use your words to share your experience of Jesus with others in ways that are authentic, natural, grace-filled and non-threatening. That’s where we are headed today. And the first step on this journey is to look at the way Jesus shared the good news with people.

Most of the stories of Jesus interacting with people included some kind of verbal invitation to receive a gift of healing or new life or some kind of experience of God’s presence in their lives. But this invitation almost always came after a demonstration of God’s love in action. He might heal someone and then say something like, “Go tell your family how much God has done for you” or “Go in peace and be freed from your suffering”.

There are some scenes in the Gospels where Jesus talks to large groups of people, but much more often we see Jesus interact with individuals, demonstrating God’s love to them in

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some way (like accepting a dinner invitation), then offering words that invite them to experience God in a whole new way. Jesus established relationships, then demonstrated God's love AND used words to let people know that God loves them.

How Loving Actions Help Us Be Contagious...

So following Jesus' example, a vitally important part of being contagious is to put God's love for people into action, and I think it's pretty clear that we get this. I asked for some feedback from you about your faith this week via an email. Many people responded, and I want to thank them for taking the time. One question I asked is, "in what ways do you think your faith is contagious?" Everyone agreed that it is primarily through their actions that their faith shines for others to see. That is on track! That is great, it's awesome! One of you wrote, *"As I grow in my faith, the people I have daily contact with see my Joy for living and yes it is contagious. I have been surprised how much my actions speak for themselves. I realize I might be the only bible someone reads."*

Someone else responded, *"I think faith is most contagious by people seeing you live your life. Talk that does not match actions is so empty. If people see that light in you, they will ask you what it is and then you can say a few things... about your faith. But mostly it is actions."*

These answers resonate with me! I am right there. How about with you? Jesus would agree, I think. He once said, **"Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."** (Matthew 5:16 TNIV) Our actions and good deeds have an immense role in having a contagious faith! Our good deeds blaze a trail of authenticity. Good deeds can engender the goodwill of others. Good deeds can get people to think about faith and help create a desire to know more or experience more. Good deeds can elicit amazement and excitement and cause people to say, "Wow! Those people really care. Maybe God is interested in my life!" Good deeds help us create authentic relationships with people who may be far from God. We don't do good deeds with the ulterior motive of preaching to people. We do good deeds because it is part of who we are (Jesus asks us to love others and serve them). We just need to recognize that our love in action may open up other opportunities and possibilities.

Aaron said it last week, demonstrating God's love with our hands (by serving them) helps us connect with people. It's certainly true that using our words would have little or no impact without the witness of love in action.

It is also true, however, that good deeds alone are not enough. Deeds and words are both needed to share the good news of a life-saving relationship with Jesus. St. Francis of Assisi understood this complimentary relationship between actions that demonstrate God's love and words that communicate God's love when he said, "Preach Christ at all times, and when necessary use words." For the longest time I interpreted that saying in a way that justified not using words, like it was telling me that using words was the last resort. But I don't see it that way anymore. I think he clearly understood that actions speak louder than words, but there will be a time when words are essential. There are times to demonstrate God's love and there will be times when we need to tell someone about the source of that love.

Paul writes in Romans 10:17 (TNIV), ***faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.*** If we care about people coming to a life-saving relationship in Christ, then we all need to be purposeful about sharing this amazing good news of Jesus with our actions and our words!

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The apostle Peter wrote a few letters to some churches in Asia Minor. At the time, these churches were enduring a persecution and the temptation for them was to lay low. But in chapter 3 of this letter, Peter encourages them to keep on doing their good deeds among those who do not believe, even among those who have intentions to harm them. He tells them to keep doing what is good, and keep doing what is right. And then he tells them this, **“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect... I Peter 3:15 (TNIV)**

Wow! Can you imagine? Don't lay low...don't protect yourself. Just get out there and do for people what Jesus would do for them. And don't worry if they do seize you or beat you or throw you in prison because of your faith...look at it as an opportunity to tell them about this eternal hope you have because of Jesus. And when that opportunity comes, be ready to use your words to tell them about Jesus (humbly and respectfully). Wow! Put yourself there. After all you endure, when you finally get to talk about Jesus, you don't even get to claim the superiority and judgment that I heard from the soapbox on the Plaza! You are to do share your words gently and respectfully.

Peter knows that doing good works, putting God's love into action, will create many opportunities for spiritual conversations. And when they arrive, we need to be prepared to share our faith. So now let's look at a model for how to talk about your faith. Let me suggest that you think in terms of stories...three of them. This three story approach comes out of a book called *The Externally Focused Church (Rucshaw and Swansen)* and I think it's a very practical and memorable way to share Christ with others.

First, listen to the other person's story. Look for ways that God is working in their life. Listen to what's behind their questions or struggles. Learn to ask good questions that will help them articulate where they are spiritually. Ask them what they think about God, about church, about faith. It's amazing what we can learn when we listen. And remember Peter's advice...respect. We can disagree with someone and their understanding of things, but we cannot disrespect them. Honoring someone's story opens their heart and builds greater trust. I know that I need to do better listening in my life...I wonder how many opportunities I have missed by choosing not to be interested enough to just listen. I think it may have happened again just the other night. Listen to their story.

Second, ask permission to tell your story. Asking permission demonstrates respect and it gives your friend or acquaintance some level of control in the situation. You know what it feels like to be cornered in a conversation you don't want to have, right? You do not want to put someone in that situation, especially when it is about the good news of Jesus. So you ask, “may I tell you a little of my story?” And if they are interested, then this is where you need to be prepared to share your story in a succinct and clear manner.

A simple way to construct your story is to think of your life in three episodes. A. What was your life like before your relationship with Jesus? B. Tell briefly about how you met Christ. C. Tell how your life is different because of Jesus. That's your story, and the simpler you tell it, the better. But get yourself prepared to share it.

Next, **Ask permission to tell God's story.** Try saying something like this...“If you're interested, sometime I'd like to show something (a book or a visual diagram) that has really helped me understand what it means to have a relationship with God.” By saying “sometime”, you take the pressure off and allow your friend to say yes or no without jeopardizing the relationship. If they are interested, then you are free to set up another time to visit, “Let's meet

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for coffee on Tuesday” or something like that. That also gives you some time to prepare to share what God has done for us through Jesus.

Remember that God is never about forcing someone to believe in Jesus. God is at work drawing people to him and giving them a desire to know him. We have the privilege of working with God in that process, so pay attention to Peter’s advice...gentle and respectful.

One great tool that I suggest you read and always have on hand to share with someone is a little publication from the Alpha Course called “Why Jesus?” It’s a great way for you to review God’s story, and it is written to give to people who are interested in starting a relationship with Jesus. Many of you have already received them through the Alpha Course. If you want one, they are almost always available in our bookstore, and they’re like \$1.50.

For us to be on God’s mission of leading people to an active faith in Jesus Christ, we need be ready and willing to share our faith with others. And we do that with both our actions and our words. Both are absolutely essential, but neither one on it’s own is enough.

Another question on the email I sent out this week asked you to share what difference Jesus has made in your life. I received some amazing responses and I’d like to share a few of them with you.

Knowing that I am forgiven – for all the mistakes I have made in my life, especially those for which I still find hard to forgive myself – and also knowing that in the same way that God forgives me, He asks that I also forgive others as well...this makes a powerful difference in how I choose to live. I cannot imagine living a life without being able to draw strength and comfort from this type of limitless, unconditional love.

I have found that I am more caring, less sarcastic, less judging, more helpful, and have more understanding for people in need...

I can see others (as a child of God), instead of separating the good from the bad (the Christian from the non-Christian). I can love them all. I can remember that we are all of his making even if we are lost and then I am free to love rather than judge.

This is why having a contagious faith is so important. This is why it’s critical that we “preach Christ at all times...and when necessary use words.” Jesus makes such a profound difference. He is the greatest news! Why wouldn’t we want to share the best news we know with someone who hasn’t discovered him yet?

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