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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
1/22/2015, The First Sunday in Lent
Mark 1:9-15
The Importance of Your Testimony

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

If you should like a title for this sermon, I call it “The Importance of Your Testimony.” Through your testimony, my friends, you might save a soul and get a life back on track. You and I love Jesus and find our lives richer because we walk with him. If so, let us be generous to our neighbors and try to introduce them too to our Savior.

My main text is the last two verses of this morning’s Gospel Lesson. This is from the First Chapter of St. Mark:

¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, ¹⁵and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.” (Mark 1:14-15, RSV)

The character of Jesus never changes. His stability of conviction is the foundation on which the writer to the Hebrews appeals to Christians to resist being swept away by every strange wind of doctrine. The famous passage goes like this:

⁸Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and for ever. ⁹Be not carried about with divers and strange doctrines. (Hebrews 13:8-9a, KJV)

I try to live by this. I try not to be “carried about with divers and strange doctrines.”

When thinking about evangelism, I think we can apply the constancy of Jesus this way:

Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and forever. If in the fairly few years of ministry granted to him long ago, he went about preaching the kingdom of God, calling people to repentance, and calling them to hope, if he did those good things *yesterday*, he does them *today* too, and he would be glad for our help.

I have said that this sermon is about the importance of your testimony. The language of “testimony” is old-fashioned language, but I’m an old-fashioned guy, so let me tell you about it a bit. I’ve mentioned my childhood preacher to you

before, Rev. H.D. Dukes. When he was young, he'd been an oysterman from Tilghman Island, if I remember right, or one of those islands just off the Eastern Shore of Maryland in the Chesapeake Bay. He had snowy white hair, and he was kind, and he was a man of clear and simple faith. Sometimes, when he was preaching, he'd stop and ask for someone in the congregation to stand up and give a testimony. "Brother Sam," he would say, "would you give us a testimony?" That was Sam Martin, the father of one of my best friends. Or he'd say, "Sister Rachel, would you share a testimony with us?" That was my mother, Rachel Fryer.

I used to love those testimonies because it helped to hear some seasoned Christian talk to us from the heart about what Jesus meant to him, to her. Sometimes we would discover that this Christian had quietly been carrying some heavy burden we had not known about. Our brother or sister in the Lord had been quietly carrying that burden, but was placing their trust in our Savior and trying to be true to him. Sometimes we would discover that this fellow Christian had been wrestling with some particular temptation — a temptation that the rest of us struggled with too — and it would be good to hear about successes and failures, victories and regrets, and the earnest crawling back to Jesus to pick up and start again. These testimonies were about real life. They were about the human adventure of trying to walk with Jesus in a tough, tempting, and sometimes exhausting world.

I bet you can understand that these testimonies were helpful to the rest of us. Using the language of Martin Luther, those testimonies in my childhood church were examples of "the mutual conversation and consolation of brethren" (*Smalcald Articles*, Part Three, Article IV) You can do the same thing in your conversations with one another during coffee hour and other times you meet. You can share something of your story with your brothers and sisters in the faith, both giving and receiving encouragement in the process.

But those good conversations are in the church, not yet in the world. These testimonies are a good part of Christian fellowship, but what about our neighbors who are not yet in the church? Giving a testimony to them is what is called "evangelism." It is the carrying of the Gospel out in the world, even to the ends of the earth, with the hope of winning souls to Christ.

Please note that the ministry of Jesus was not confined to the church. Think of the Samaritan woman at the well, for example (John 4). Jesus did not find this woman in the church, but out in the world, doing her work-a-day labors. She was collecting water from a well. Jesus struck up a conversation with her, and it ended up making all the difference in the world.

In this sermon, I hope to encourage us to join Jesus in these kind of conversations. Let me make three points about trying to draw others to Jesus: (1) I think that there is a lot of loneliness and spiritual hunger in our city. There are people who will be glad to learn of Jesus if we will give them a chance. (2) The Triune God is at work in each of our neighbors even before we come on the scene. It *must* be this way, because every person on the face of this earth is created by God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who desires that each of them

should be saved. And (3) the beginning point of drawing someone to Christ is that we should be friendly with that person and try to enjoy each person we meet throughout our day.

So, here we go with these three points. Let's begin with spiritual hunger in our city.

SPIRITUAL HUNGER IN OUR TOWN

There are a lot of lonely people in our town. It's like the shipwrecked person floating in the sea: water, water everywhere, but not a drop to drink. So it is with many people we meet during the day: we are surrounded by people, literally by millions of people in New York City, and yet many of them are lonely.

And it's not just New York City, but rather our whole land is becoming lonely and isolated. Lutheran pastor Rev. Greg Finke puts the point this way:

The American Sociological Review recently reported that 53% of Americans have no one (outside of their immediate family) with whom they can discuss important matters. In other words, more than half the people we see every day have almost no one who gives a rip about what they are thinking, wondering or wrestling with.¹

We could add that some of those lonely people do not even have their immediate families to talk with — at least they don't have them close at hand. Those family members are spread across the land. We can talk with them by phone or email or Facebook or whatever, but it is not the same as having them close at hand.

But during the course of your day, you are the one who is going to be close at hand to some lonely people. It's something to ponder. There are people we see every day, but we have not yet had a friendly conversation with them or even gotten to know their names. We ride the elevator with them in our apartment buildings or places of work. We deal with the same shopkeepers and barbers and shoeshine person, but we have not begun to enjoy them because we haven't much tried. But for all we know, these people are struggling with profound hopes and dreams and fears, and if we could begin to more friendly to them, there might come a point someday when they will trust us enough to discuss their spiritual hunger with us. Then we can speak of Jesus to them. We can give a honest testimony to them. It might make no difference that we can see, and yet it might be the start of a path that will someday lead that person to Christ and his holy Church.

¹ Finke, Greg (2014-01-26). *Joining Jesus on His Mission: How to Be an Everyday Missionary* (pp. 113-114). Tenth Power Publishing. Kindle Edition. My three points in this sermon were all inspired by this book.

THE TRIUNE GOD

My second point is meant to take some of the pressure off us when it comes to trying to save others. I think it is encouraging to remember that there is not a person we can meet on this old globe of ours who has somehow been abandoned by our God. Each soul on earth has been created, watched over, and preserved to this point in life in hope that that soul will be saved. What has been happening to our neighbors is not some random collection of forces, with no meaning. Rather, the Triune God has created our neighbors, died for their salvation, and is working right now to bring them to repentance, to hope, and into the kingdom of God. All we are doing is lending a hand. In fact, we need not think that our meeting them that day as some random act in their life and in ours. Rather, we can view each encounter with a neighbor as a divine moment in our lives in which our God hopes we will give it a try at beginning a witness to Christ. If we will give it a try, he lives to accept our attempt and to bring good from it — good that we might not live to see, but which is important in any case.

FRIENDLINESS

My last point is that for many of us, we will not win people by our eloquence, but more by our gentleness and friendliness. Few of us are revival preachers. The cool thing about a revival preacher is that he can come striding into town and preach such a fiery sermon that he wins a whole bunch of people for Christ, and then he moves on to the next town. For most of us, that will not be our way. Our way has more to do with the long haul and with being kind to the people we see every day.

There is no strict mathematics to the moment when it is right to speak of Jesus. If we begin too early, we might lose the person, because that person will sense that we do not really care about him or her, but rather have our own agenda. On the other hand, sometimes it is right to speak of Jesus immediately, even with a stranger, because the situation cries out for Christ. I still smile, for example, when I remember a passing scene in the life of Richard John Neuhaus. He said that he came upon two men fighting on the sidewalks of our town. They were rolling around on the ground and punching each other. So Father Neuhaus stood over them and commanded them to stop. One of them looked up and said, “Why should we?” And Neuhaus blurted out, “Because I’m a priest!” That was good enough for them and they stopped fighting. Sometimes, you see, the situation is simply crying out for someone to speak of the divine dimension in life.

I think the trick is to somehow balance true gentleness and true concern for our neighbors with the ultimate goal of winning them to Christ. We cannot forever avoid speaking of Jesus, lest we miss some divine moments full of potential to win others to Christ.

HOSPITALITY COMMITTEE

Toward the end of this liturgy, just before the Benediction, I mean to introduce our new Hospitality Committee to you. The Chair of the Committee, Stephanie Sparvero, will speak to us about the Committee and invite you to join the Committee too. What I want to say about the Committee is that I hope we will cherish it as a symbol and reminder of evangelism and a Godly force working toward saving others.

This is what Jesus did. He went about meeting folks, talking with them, calling them to repentance and hope, and bringing them into his kingdom. That's what he did until he was nailed to a cross and his mighty heart stopped beating. But Easter means that his heart is beating again, and with every beat, he is working for the salvation of our neighbors. He would be glad for our help, each of us, and to him be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.