

Good Practices for the Soul: Witness Acts 1:8, 8:26-39 3/21/21

In a Peanuts comic strip, Linus approaches his sister, Lucy who is jumping rope, and asks, "Do you ever pray, Lucy?" "That's kind of personal question, isn't it?" she replies. "Are you trying to start an argument?" "I SUPPOSE YOU THINK YOU'RE SOMEBODY PRETTY SMART, DON'T YOU? I SUPPOSE YOU THINK..." In the last frame, Linus is sitting next to Charlie Brown, holding his blanket and sucking his thumb. He says, "You're right...religion is a very touchy subject!"

Maybe because we fear religion is a touchy subject, or maybe because we don't think we know enough, or maybe because we're afraid of turning someone off, or because we fear what they might think of us... for whatever reason, many of us do not share our faith with others. And, that is a problem- for the church, for those who need to hear the Good News, and for us. Because personally sharing our faith is the only way many people will hear the gospel, and it is one of those spiritual disciplines that helps us grow in our own faith. So, let's look at two passages from the Bible that may help us in this area of Christian discipleship.

In Acts 1, Jesus has already gone to the cross, been resurrected, and appeared to the disciples and others over a period of 40 days. He is giving his parting instructions to his followers, and says, "⁸*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.” (Acts 1:8) In this well-known verse, Jesus commissions his

followers to be his witnesses to an ever-widening circle of people.

Beginning where they are- in Jerusalem and Judea, then outward to the Samaritans- people that they had been brought up to despise, and finally to the ends of the earth, where Gentiles lived. These Jewish disciples lived under a whole system of rules designed to keep them separate from Gentiles! But now Jesus is telling them to go and be witnesses to those very people!

I believe that the Spirit is still compelling us to go outward to people we might not usually associate with- for example, to poor and even homeless people, and to Spanish-speaking immigrants in our community. I'm pleased that our new after-school program is reaching immigrant families right now. But the pandemic has also opened up another new group to us- digital adherents to our church. They may live in other states, or even other countries. My own small group has one member in Colorado and another in England! But, how will we embrace and minister to people who don't live in our community? What would that even look like? The message of Jesus is that we need to find a way!

Notice also that the instruction is to “be my witnesses.” They are instructed to simply tell what they have seen and experienced. That's a

pretty good place to start for us. How have we experienced God's grace in our own lives? What difference has being a Christian meant to you? Do you find comfort in your faith? Direction? Strength to fight temptation? Deliverance from addiction? Hope? What difference does Jesus make in your life? Right after Easter, I'll be teaching a course on Zoom called "Engage," which will help us put together our own faith story. Maybe you could participate!

Skip over to Acts 8, where Phillip, a deacon, shows us how it's done as he witnesses to an unexpected character. ²⁶*Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.)* ²⁷*So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship* ²⁸*and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah.* ²⁹*Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it."* ³⁰*So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?"* ³¹*He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.* ³²*Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth."* ³³*In his humiliation*

justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.” ³⁴*The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?”* ³⁵*Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.* ³⁶*As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?”* ³⁸*He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.* ³⁹*When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. (Acts 8:26-39)*

Wow! I’d like to point out a few things in this story that may prove helpful to us in our attempts at Christian witness. First, notice how the Spirit is at work throughout this entire encounter. Philip is directed to the specific road by the Spirit. The Spirit tells him to approach the chariot. The Spirit was already working in the high-ranking, Ethiopian court official, who was reading the prophet Isaiah as he rode along! And, after the encounter, the Spirit whisks Philip away to his next spiritual engagement.

This is an important reminder to us; God is already at work in the hearts of anyone with whom you may share your faith! You may not be aware of it; the other person may not be aware of it! But God desires that

people come to know him even more than we do. So, God is constantly at work, drawing people to himself, like a shepherd searching for a lost sheep, or a widow seeking her lost coin as we read in Luke 15. God is actively seeking lost people. We have an important role to play, by sharing our faith, but it is God who is already at work in the heart.

In Sept. 1999, Pastor Tuy Seng traveled to northern Cambodia, winding up in a small, rural village. Since most of the people of the area had cast their lot with Buddhism or spiritism, he was surprised at their warm welcome. When he asked the villagers about their openness, an elderly woman shuffled forward and said, “We have been waiting for you for twenty years!”

You see, in the 1970’s the brutal Khmer Rouge regime took over Cambodia, destroying everything in their path. They eventually came to this village, rounded up the villagers and forced them to dig their own graves. As they were digging, the villagers prepared themselves to die, crying out to various gods and to their ancestors. But one of the women remembered that her mother had told her about a god who hung on a cross, so she began to pray to that unknown god, figuring that he would understand suffering and maybe have compassion on them. Soon others in the village joined in crying out to this suffering God who hung from a cross.

Then things became quiet. As the villagers dared to turn around, they discovered that their captors had left! They were saved. And they began a 20-year wait for someone to come and tell them more about the God who hung on a cross. God is at work in strange and unexpected ways, preparing people for our witness. For your witness!

Second, Philip observes, and then asks a good question. He hears the Ethiopian reading scripture and asks him if he understands what he is reading. He takes the obvious spiritual interest of this man and creates an opportunity for conversation. We can observe and ask good questions that lead to spiritual conversations, too! If someone is dealing with a difficult matter, we can ask, "What do you usually rely on during a crisis?" And then see where the conversation goes, looking for an opportunity to share your own experience of faith. At work, we might ask, "How do you handle the frustration that comes with this job?" Again, look for an opportunity to share your own experience.

Or, you could be more proactive, perhaps wearing the GPC mask, and seeing if anyone asks you about it! One of our members has invited an out-of-the-area friend to watch our worship services on-line. Afterwards, they talk about the service, looking for opportunities to share their faith together. Observe what's going on with people, and ask good questions that invite them into a faith conversation.

In verse 35 we are told that Philip “*proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.*” It’s important to remember that the gospel is good news! We don’t usually hesitate to share good news about a new restaurant, book, app, website, or movie with people. The gospel is even better news than that! God loves us, is seeking after us, has provided for the forgiveness of our sins, and wants to engage with us, giving direction and purpose to our lives. That is truly good news!

In the People’s Republic of China, the Three-Self Church is the only church approved by the state. If you visit one of their worship services, you will hear hymns, scripture readings, prayers, and sermons. Everything appears normal. And it is, except they are not allowed to share their faith with others. That’s part of their deal with the government. “You can do your thing as long as your thing doesn’t include persuading somebody else.”

But there are tens of millions of Christians in China who have chosen not to be part of the Three-Self Church. They risk persecution by meeting in unauthorized house churches because they’re convinced that you can’t be a Christian unless you share your faith. It is an essential part of following Jesus. Ironically, in our country where there is no bar to sharing our faith with others, many Christians refrain from doing so for multiple

reasons. Are we shirking an essential part of Christian faith? I agree with those Chinese house-church Christians in thinking that we are.

So, pray that God will be at work in your heart and in the hearts of those you encounter. Look for opportunities God will bring your way to share your own faith experience with others. Consider taking the “Engage” course coming soon. And watch for how God will build your own excitement about Jesus as you share the good news with others.