

## Sharing our Hope Romans 10:1-15

This sermon picks up from last week's sermon of random thoughts that may or may not hang together. We can either be pessimists who see the difficulties in every opportunity. Or we can be optimists who see the opportunity in every difficulty. The sermon tries to point to what can we do as a remnant in a post-Christian world. What can we do when our faithfulness and hard work and patience, does not bring the results it once did? How can we face today's challenges?

**First**, I have always thought it is presumptuous of us to believe that our good works is enough when it comes to sharing Jesus. I know of a situation where a group of six men, from a congregation, who never hung around with each other, showed up to clean out a house after a house fire. This was not a usual activity for the church. But the two women living there, did not have the ability to clean up the house enough so inspectors could give the go ahead on what needed repairs. It is a great story.

Up to this point. I asked the men how it had gone, and they said they enjoyed the experience. They were glad to rearrange their various schedules to help. Then I asked, "Did you tell the women who you were and who you represented?" The response was, "No."

I asked, "Did you let them know you were from our church?" They said, "No."

"Did you let them know in some way that you were there because of your faith in Jesus?" Again, the response was, "No."

I asked, "Did you hand out the church brochure that was made for this kind of situation and did you invite them to church?" The answer was, sadly, "No, never thought of that."

**Bottom line, it is not evangelism until we speak.** It is good to do service and be helpful. But how do people know what our basic motives are unless we speak? Are we really representing Christ fully unless we speak? After Hurricane Katrina, lots of different kinds

of groups helped. After the flood in High River lots of diverse groups helped. It was wonderful to see how willing groups with caring motives stepped up to help in a variety of ways. But how do people know who represents Christ?

Words and actions are like two wings of an airplane. We will not catch flight in witness with just one or the other. Words are needed to explain the actions. It is the pattern we see in Jesus' ministry in the Gospels. Constantly there was a demonstration of the Kingdom of God, with an explanation. Jesus offers a lot of words.

**Another thought**, years ago, we attended a Billy Graham Evangelism Seminar at the Lake Louise Hotel, right on the lake. The group of 800 or so, were reminded several times we were there to attend the week-long seminar – not to be tourists. It was 5 days packed with wonderful speakers, and seminars, focused on evangelism.

I particularly remember one break out session, where the speaker, a professor, urged us to make time to intentionally meet, hang around with non-Christians. **His focus was, befriend people who do not know Jesus.** This was met with quite strong vocal resistance. The body language of a lot of listeners was, frankly, hostile. And the private comments I heard as we left the session, were not Christlike or kind.

Reality is, when people become believers, they tend to lose their non-Christians friends within 5 years. I can tell you from experience, few churches want to pay pastors to spend time relating to non-believers. For example, they will not help with membership fees to join civic or secular organizations, but being involved on conference committees is ok. The pastor's use of time is rightly always questioned, because church people rightly ask – what about doing what you are paid for - which is to care for us? But what about church growth?

The seminar speaker had his theological and practical arguments. And he shared what he himself did to mix with non-Christians. He deliberately chose to be involved in several non

church groups like a tennis club, and so on. He shared how he looked for opportunities to share about his faith, in various ways, by purposely attending non church events. Plus, he shared about his prayer life asking for opportunities, to see, & to find openings to share the Gospel in some way. He shared how he intentionally limited his time in religious and social activities and with church friends, so he could mingle with non-believers.

Any idea what the major objection of the group in the seminar was? It was that they would lose their pastorates if they focused on people outside the church. Church members would accuse them of, “not caring for us!”

I organized a pastor’s retreat with two guest speakers with the focus of getting to know and work with our neighbors. Guess what the pastors immediately said, “If I asked church members to spend more time relating to their neighbors, who would manage and carry out all the church activities, especially worship?” Maybe we are too busy with our internal focuses?

Also, **another thought**, it has been fascinating to see how often when pastors have helped a church grow, that it almost always comes with tension. New people naturally bring new ideas, skills, and opinions. This can be threatening to regular church members – including people simply sitting where they usually sit. And maybe they have better skills. Every church wants to grow but does not want to change. So, tension rises, usually blaming the pastor. The pastor leaves – often as the scapegoat. The newcomers leave. I have seen this process and worked with its after- effects, more often than I like.

Repeating Ed Stetzer’s analogy that I used last week. The problem is, while many have fixed up the barn, the wheat still is not harvesting itself. We have some nice-looking barns that we protect with pride. The problem is that we have fields and fields yet to be harvested.

Our calling is not to fill our barns. People know that is what we want, and they resist this. A delightful young couple were church shopping. When they attended a worship service, people immediately suggested they could fill a church job. Needless to say, they did not return.

**Our core conviction is that Jesus is the good news – and not that we fill our church barn!** This is a fine line, but we must manage it better. The barn being filled is a bonus so we have more workers to carry out the institutional programs.

But this ironically defeats meeting people where they are & with Jesus. We can do analysis; we can do the programs that reach people; we can hire the most talented people; we can do all the service we can; we can even be the best verbal evangelists, but we must be totally convinced that people need Jesus first. Our service, peace, justice, love, & worship means nothing, without the King of Kings who makes them possible, because hearts and souls have been changed.

Jesus warns us, “Apart from me, you can do nothing.” (John 15:5) As the great evangelist E. Stanley Jones said, “Do we believe in good views or good news?” Are our purposes about strengthening the holy huddle, or being willing to sacrifice to enlarge it?

Along with understanding that whatever we do must include verbal evangelism where we speak, we have to **recapture a heart of compassion for the lost** – both physically, emotionally, relationally, mentally and especially spiritually. That is not politically correct to say today. It implies some people are in and some people are outside. But if we do not believe this, why offer people Jesus? Why invite people to adapt and believe in counter cultural values?

In a way, today’s biggest cultural sin is to be intolerant. But Scripture is clearly intolerant about some behavior and thought patterns. And not fully following Jesus. We must not become acculturated in this way.

The old saying, “Sticks and stone will break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” That is not quite right. Words can wound deeply. Or words can lift people up. Words help explain values and inspire and bring life. The Bible in the beginning of all of creation, started with the word – and God saw that what he made was good! And Jesus offers us lots of wise words, especially as he got people’s attention by healing them.

Jesus said he came to seek and to save the lost. (Luke 19:10) **This is the best news we have.** Do we passionately believe that all people, we included, are lost without Christ? That sin separates us from abundant life now and the eternal life God offers us?

A speaker asked students at a Christian school whether human beings are essentially good. Over half said yes. But until we realize how lost we are in broken behaviors, systems, relationships, and ungodly attitudes, we cannot comprehend the depth of God’s love for us or be able to find the courage to share it with others.

There are many lists of what we have always needed to do and what we need to reinforce today more than ever as a remnant. Here is one. **We need to be known for our love.** People know this and we are often judged by this. We owe it to others to reflect the image of God.

**We need to be people full of grace.** Jesus extends his grace to us, and we pass it on. May we always ere on the side of grace.

When followers of Jesus discuss “**purity,**” we must know it is much more than sex. We need to be pure, holy in our motives, speech, handling wealth, actions, business, & all our relationships.

It is always tough to **be patient.** But we work on reflecting the patience of God with us.

I have alluded to the importance of being known for **sacrifice** several times. It is a quality that reflects our Father in heaven.

I have alluded to the value of being **selfless.** It is an attribute that puts others before our selves like Jesus did. It ties in with being generous way beyond money. Selflessness says more about our hearts than we like.

Next, we get no-where in our service and justice work, nor in our speaking evangelism efforts, without **respecting people.** Today’s media feeds off disrespectful believers & people we disagree with. Instead, we must be known as a people who always offer respect and honor.

**We need to be known for our commitment.** This ties in with trustworthy, steadfastness, and loyalty. But we can all name areas of church life and our spiritual lives that have displayed our lack of commitment. It is a key method of evangelism when we put Jesus and church first. We know how to live these traits. We must intentionally, consciously, and purposefully, live them more fully as remnant people. Our children see how we prioritize our time, & our attitudes.

We also need to study other reasons why people find faith hard to accept. Here are three strong motives for rejecting Jesus, that **we need to keep finding creative ways to address.** Study how Jesus responded to people. He was creative. He set the tone and the topic. He used stories. He told a lot of them.

There are intellectual reasons but the most frustrating I have found tend to be these three. **First, they and we are bothered by human suffering.** Why does God not take care of Putin and we could name a lot of other people? Or clear out corrupt leaders? The problem is: this attitude insists that God run the world MY way. I know better than my Creator!

This is not an intellectual problem. It is a heart attitude problem. Physical pain is a warning that something is wrong and endangering our bodies. Emotional pain is a warning that something is wrong with the world & in our relationship with God. All we know is suffering will end when Jesus returns. But so will the opportunity to be saved. So, accept our Creator’s

choice as the Almighty waits patiently for us. I think this is why a gift of the Spirit is patience.

***A second motive is people would rather condemn Scripture than bow to its Author.*** We all want to live life our own way, rather than God's way. This is why the Bible talks about temptation so much. But we defend and try to justify our own actions. And as believers we fall into some of the habits we have mentioned.

***The third motive*** for rejecting Jesus, or watering his demands down is, ***being disillusioned by believers.*** There are many reasons to do this, and this is the one I have heard most often. You probably know that Gandhi said, "If it were not for Christians, I would be a Christian."

I have read different backgrounds to this story, but simply, when Gandhi tried to attend a church service, he was turned away. He was told he was not welcome, because he was not ethnically qualified to be there. That goes against many Christian values. It was an evangelism fail. What would India & the global church be like if Gandhi had become a follower of Jesus?

The Buddhists have a saying, "Do not confuse the finger pointing at the moon for the moon itself." The finger pointing at the moon is not the moon itself. This argument people use to reject the church and even Jesus is one we need to find better ways to talk about with people.

**Another thought** about sharing the hope we have, about how to have beautiful feet taking good news to others, is we need to keep testing, learning, trying, and being creative. Just like we need to learn new technology, test out new ideas in our work, and try new methods, the same is true for each of us and congregations. The world is changing so fast, that it is hard to keep up. But we must respond.

If I could live my life over again, I would shadow an evangelist. Not just one who preaches a good sermon, but one who engages people around them in conversation. Most believers are weak at this. It is not really in our more recent Mennonite heritage. And I do not know

of a course that teaches this where we practice. We simply do not know how to talk with people about Jesus. And we fear doing so. We need to have training doing this – not just talking about the latest reaching out fad, system and program.

With first aid we learn and then practice and practice some more. Malcolm Gladwell's book "Outliers," argues that it takes 10,000 hours of intensive practice to achieve mastery of complex skills and materials, like playing the violin or developing as a hockey player or getting as good as Bill Gates at computer programming. We need this kind of practice, testing, and trying simply to get better at verbal evangelism. And, it is important to have good teachers, which we do not have.

Plus, we need to, like with any medical person, keep learning and in a sense recertify to develop the skill & reduce our fears of verbal evangelism.

Today there are lots of training tools, which are helpful, but we also simply need to speak when the opportunity comes as well as pray for and seek openings, opportunities.

Simply, we need to pick up where the original Anabaptists left off. We need to do what the Chinese Christians did when the missionaries were kicked out. We can be like the Ethiopian followers of Jesus, when they had to go underground. These are three historical examples of when and how the Good News Gospel spread.

Verbal witnessing is not someone else's job. It is a skill we all can get better at. We must not rest on – it is not my aptitude, talent, or skill. It is not who I am. All of us can move from an ability level of 3 to a 5 or 6. Most of us will not have a rating of 10 in most life and church skills. But our calling is to let people know why we have the hope and life perspectives that we have as followers of Jesus.

I learned to preach – for better or worse, despite a variety of obstacles. Rose, who is musical, asked God to help her learn guitar well enough so she could lead singing, until God brought a much better guitar player to us. The point is,

God has put each of us here, to learn, try, test, be creative and develop what this church needs, to reach out to people around us with hope.

**Thought.** What is the best thing that has happened to you in the last few years? A grand-child? Children getting married? A parent is not suffering anymore? Recovery of health? A new machine or toy? Wonderful success at work? A grand vacation? What is the best thing in your life recently? After you answer this question, move on to the more important question. Did you tell anyone about it? Did you find that you had to share it with a number of people?

Odds are, you did, and you were spreading the joy. We love sharing good news. In the retelling, we not only re-experience those same wonderful moments, we also spread those good vibrations around, allowing others to step into the same kind of wonder. We are all wired to share good news. Our Creator designed us in his image, so we have taken on, at least on our better days, some of the Almighty's characteristics. And our Savior loves to share good news. Most teachings about creation point out how God did some bragging, with the phrase, "and God saw that it was good."

Jesus was sent to earth as good news. So why do so many of us find ourselves hesitant, insecure, or just plain resistant when it comes to talking about the very thing we say is the best hope for all humankind? Why do we say it is not our gift or calling to share about the greatest expression of love in the universe, the climax on which history and our lives hinge?

When I first got to know Presbyterians as an adult, they talked jokingly and seriously about their denomination being the "frozen chosen." This is not just about verbally speaking about Jesus, it is also about volunteering, stepping up to the plate in church and in any ministry.

Being a follower of Jesus is hard and will become more scary as we are today's remnant. So, our living and evangelism efforts require we know **we are sheep among wolves**. Jesus said,

"I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore, be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves." (Mt10:16) Most people will allow us to tell our story. So have a few personal stories of how Jesus was worked in your life. And how you find his support. And the more recent the better.

So as a sports term says, we need to "step up our verbal evangelism game." How can you take your life to the next level, increase your intensity and commitment to share Jesus living water?

Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again, The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." John 4:13-14

Let's close with these wonderful verses. "So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

(2 Corinthians 4:16-18)

This hope is what we want to offer people in the name of Jesus.