

Tell Me About Jesus

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Tell me about Jesus. The gospel today falls into two sections and both sections help answer this question. The first is about the challenge that Jesus faces in his own town. Who is this Jesus that he thinks he can tell us what to do. This is just Mary and Joseph's boy and he's only a carpenter anyway. The second though is what I want to focus on. The second portion is the story of Jesus sending out his 12 disciples, two by two to heal the sick and spread the word.

Set aside the instructions of taking very limited supplies. He allows them to take less than the airlines allow as carry on luggage. There is a message of trust in this instruction and while important is not my focus today.

The focus is on the spreading the news of Christ to a world that for the most part has never heard of him. In fact his life as a person was not yet over, there is no miraculous resurrection to tell about. So they are sent out to do and to teach. These two actions are inextricably linked together. They are expected to do both. This brings up an interesting and all two common contemporary problem.

In many mainstream parishes there is a false division between mission and evangelism. How many have ever been at a church where the evangelism and the outreach committee were one and the same. Well how many have been in an Episcopal church that even had an evangelism committee. Yet Jesus links these two together in today's gospel.

We often gravitate to mission "work" and avoid evangelism. If I were to ask for a group to get together and go out with Fred Parkinson in two weeks to help rebuild a house here in Virginia Beach I would probably have plenty of volunteers. If I was to ask for a group to go out and talk to people about Jesus, I suspect I would see a less than enthusiastic response. To be honest most of us will gladly talk about anything other than our beliefs. Sex, money, politics, you name it, we'll talk about it, but expect us to articulate what we believe and to strangers no less. No thank you.

How willing are we to talk about our faith? We readily jump at the chance to "do", but get very nervous when asked about what we believe.

I came across a story that illustrates the point.¹ A woman was working as a cashier at a Christian bookstore. A Jewish man came in and asked for information about Jesus. The woman said, "Well come right this way." She led him to a huge display of books about Jesus. The Jewish man shook his head and said, "No I don't want books.

I want you to tell me about Jesus.” She was speechless. How many of us would be speechless at that question.

When my wife Wendy was at John Carroll University there was a doctor, an OB/GYN, auditing a New Testament course. He was a Moslem and wanted to understand the religion of most of his patients. He constantly asked very simple but challenging questions that boiled down to “tell me about Jesus.” Wendy mentioned how this really made her think about what to say and distill her thoughts and feelings. How would you answer the question, tell me about Jesus. Well here is your chance. This is a dialogue sermon. Imagine that the person sitting next to you is not Christian and has just asked you, tell me about Jesus. OK, now take a few minutes and do just that. Turn to the person next to you and answer the question. (After an awkward silence people laughed nervously and after more cajoling from the pulpit, the discussions began in earnest.)

I am not so concerned about what you said about Jesus, but want to know how did that feel? (Comments from the congregation were made most centering on feeling uneasy, awkward, nervous and unprepared to answer the question.)

Our epistle plays a part in this discussion. Paul is faced with what several writers have called “super apostles.” Self appointed experts who claim superior knowledge superior spiritual gifts. Paul not wanting to play the my spiritual gifts are better than yours instead says, “I know a person who” and then proceeds to describe what his experience has been. There are many super apostles out there today and they make most of uneasy, so uneasy that we are afraid to speak honestly and openly about our faith. This happens not only in Christianity, but in other religions.

An Imam in the Boston area had been invited to give a presentation about mainstream Islamic beliefs. As the program drew to a close, the crowd, which had originally been pretty hostile, asked him why more moderates do not speak out about Islam and get the moderate message heard. He answered the question with a question. Why don't you moderate Christians make your views known. Most of the Moslem world's view of Christianity is formed by what they see on TV and in the media. Stop and think about that. What if all you knew about Christianity came from TV? Well that is how it is for many un-churched people. They do not know that the moderate voices even exist. Many do not want anything to do with the conservative view and lacking an alternative they simply remain un-churched. We are the voice that they need to hear.

I have been invited into new ecumenical group. Prayer at our meetings was the topic for the day. We made the decision to pray in our tradition and not worry about offending. Now this is truly ecumenical group in that we have other traditions than Christianity in the group. That's the purpose, to unit people of faith from all over Virginia Beach and then to look at how we may address some of the big issues in social justice. But we need to understand each other first. To do that we are sharing what we believe. Now we are all clergy, but even we are challenged in how to speak

about our deepest beliefs. Eventually we hope to include many of you in this dialogue.

There is a difference about saying what you believe to inform and understand rather than to coerce. Sharing our faith can be a gift to another person. When offered in love the person can accept or reject and we must accept their decision. However we must be prepared to say something about what we believe. Helping to give words is the purpose of many of my sermons, our Adult Formation classes and Education For Ministry. Many complain that conservative Christians can quote chapter and verse. Well they can because they have taken the time to study the material. How can we spread the good news that we know in our hearts if we will not talk about it amongst ourselves. How can we spread the good news if we have not thought about what to say. This process of gaining confidence is at the heart of what our Christian Formation program for all ages should be about.

Evangelism simply means speaking the good news. You don't need polished words or phrases. You do not need to be able to quote chapter and verse. You do need to be able to articulate our faith in our own words. Articulate what you believe in words that are sincere, from the heart and not be ashamed to speak what you believe.

Someone at vestry the other night said, "Mark what you are talking about is evangelism within our own walls before we move our evangelism into the community." That is in fact a pretty accurate statement. We cannot share what we do not have. We cannot give to others what we do not have. The purpose of church is for all of us to discover what it is we know about God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. The purpose of church is to encounter the holy. Church is all about meeting Jesus so when someone asks the question, tell me about Jesus. We have an answer.

When we can talk about Jesus amongst ourselves, then we can talk to others. Evangelism starts at home and then goes out to the world. That's the pattern Jesus used and what we need to do as well.

¹ Taylor, Barbara edit. Feasting on the Word Year B vol 3. (Westminster John Knox Press Louisville KY 2009) pg 216