



Great Ends of the Church #1

Holy Conversation

Romans 10:12-17

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I lived most of my life near the lakes of Minneapolis, Minnesota. Minneapolis had great foresight when it took the land surrounding its lakes and turned it into public parks. I lived near a lake called Lake Harriet, and one time, I lived in a rented house with 3 other women. We spent many hours at the lake – walking, biking, running.

One of the women who shared this house was a huge flirt. She would go biking around the lakes in the evening (3 of them in a ten mile loop), and when she returned, she often had a date for the weekend. I finally asked her, how did she do it?

After biking, she would pick out a certain park bench by the bandstand, lean her bike against the bench, sit down and read a book. Almost every time, she said, a man would stop and start a conversation. I decided, why not? She showed me which bench it was, and one evening I decided to give it a go.

I biked my ten miles around the 3 lakes, went to the aforementioned park bench, leaned my bike against the bench, sat down and began to read a book. Sure enough, within 20 minutes a man approached the bench and asked if he could sit down. I said yes, and we started a conversation.

It was immediately apparent that he wasn't from America. He was visiting from India, and was looking for someone to show him the sights of Minneapolis. I didn't bite on that one, but we continued to talk. He told me about his life, his travels, and his education. I was so impressed that at one point I blurted out, "Holy cow!"

He stopped talking, looked at me, and was silent for a moment. Then he said, "That's my religion."

I didn't get it at first. Then it hit me. Had I just insulted him? Were cows sacred in his religion? I felt awful and began to apologize, trying to explain it was just a way to express astonishment. He listened for a moment and then said, "You're one of *those*, aren't you?"

Even though he didn't explain, I knew immediately what he was talking about. "You're one of those *Christians*, aren't you?" he said with vehemence in his voice at the

word Christian. I was so astonished that all I could do was nod my head. “You’re one of those people who think Jesus is the only way to God, aren’t you?” By now, I could hear the hatred in his voice.

He never gave me a chance to speak. He began to tell me everything he hated about Christianity. He got himself so worked up, that he stood up, turned to me, spit at my feet and walked again.

Needless to say, I never tried that bench thing again.

Today, we begin a 6 week series called the “The Great Ends of the Church.” Another way to say is “The Purposes of the Church.” They are listed in the Presbyterian Book of Order – I guess you could call this book the Presbyterian Bible on how to run a church.

We consider this series important enough to make it a church wide event. For the next 6 Sunday, we will take a look at one of the Great Ends of the church. You will hear a sermon on Sunday. In Sunday School, the children will be studying the same topic that is preached. So, if your child or grandchild is here today, continue the conversation with them. Find out what they learned. Tell them a bit what you learned. The next day, on Monday, an adult class will be offered at 10 a.m. to further continue the conversation started on Sunday.

I told you that story of my experience at the lake because today’s “great end of the church” is called “the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind.” You see it on the front of your bulletin.

When I was in New Jersey, I attended an all day workshop on church transformation presented by our Presbytery. The headline speaker was a woman whose name I don’t remember, but I do remember one thing she said that has stayed with me. She said this: “I believe the reason why the Presbyterian denomination is declining is because we have forgotten how to talk about our faith with the outside world.”

I agree with her. Perhaps we have never learned how to put into words what is deep in our hearts with God. And to add another reason why we don’t talk about our faith is because of the kind of experience I had at the lake. We are afraid that we will offend people, and so we keep our faith to ourselves.

As a result, we talk about our faith in a round-about-way. I do this myself – I am preaching to myself today. We talk about *church* and how meaningful *church* is to us.

Come to church we say. We are friendly, have a great music program, a great preacher, a mission program; we talk about whatever it is that we think will bring people to church. The church even develop programs so that the congregation will be more appealing to outsiders. What we are doing is selling the services the church provides - which is good.

However, proclamation is not talking about what the church can do for you. Rather it is talking about what God has done for us.

The word proclaim means to cry out before and has the connotation of the town crier or the herald. Proclamations are public statements to the town or to the world. The very purpose of proclaiming is to make something public. Thus, the church exists in order to proclaim, to make something public.

How many of you know our purpose statement here at Valley Presbyterian? “To know Christ and to make him known through word and deed.” Say it with me....I really encourage all of you to memorize this. It is short and to the point.

To make Christ known. Jesus said, Go...make disciples. Make me known. Proclaim me. Go...be my witness to the ends of the earth. We proclaim Christ or make Christ public because Jesus tells us to do so.

Make Christ known – in 2 ways: through word and deed. We Presbyterians are awesome at the deed part. This church does some amazing things, just look at the Patio sale, all the missions we support financially and with our time and effort. I am proud of this church for all you do for and out in our community. We take to heart the words of St. Francis of Assisi:

“Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words.”

But there are times when words are necessary. Proclamation is not only deeds, it is words, too. And yes, we do it here on Sunday mornings as we worship and praise our Maker. Yet, proclamation is not just for us; it is for those who are not yet part of this community of faith. The church is to nurture those who are already part of its life (and you will hear about that purpose next week), but it also proclaims to those who are not.

We hear that actions speak louder than words, yet our passage today says we are to use words. The church exists in order to proclaim and we cannot be silent. If we go out and love/serve someone in Christ, as our passage says, if we do not speak why we do what we do, how will they know?

Read with me verses 14 and 15: “But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?”

Our lives have been transformed by Christ. That is why we are here. We are called to invite others to participate in such transformation. The focus of proclamation is not who we are, or even who we have become. Proclamation is who God is and what God has done and is doing in our lives.

So, let’s get practical. I called my message today ‘Holy Conversation.’ I want to give you a practical way to talk about God in everyday conversation...thus, making our conversations holy.

Here it is: Try to talk about God, not church.

When I first moved to NJ, a woman came up to me and told me about an organization with which she was very involved. She talked about how meaningful it was to her and all the things that they did. She said I needed to become a part of this organization. Frankly, I had no desire to join because it meant nothing to me. I was glad it was important to her, but it meant nothing to me.

Many people we know have not grown up in the church. More and more people in our world have never been to a church service. And that will continue to increase. So when you talk about church, it means nothing to them. They'll say, "Well, that's fine for you, but I don't need it."

So we must learn to talk about God. Today, people are not interested in religion, but they are interested in spiritual things. They are not interested in church, but they will talk about God. People are interested in Jesus and want to know more about him.

So, I encourage you to learn to talk about God in your own life. Have your own story ready. Talk about your faith journey. Tell a story when you knew God was alive and active in your life. People can relate to that because we are all on a spiritual journey. And as we tell our stories, it says to others that God isn't just a distant idea but someone who is active and real in our lives.

Several months ago, I took several people from the Membership and Outreach Committee to a conference on Outreach in Tucson. At this conference, they talked about going out and doing good deeds in our community. But they also said they were ready to use words when necessary. When someone came up to them and asked why they were helping, one person had an answer ready: "I love God, and by serving you, I serve God." Notice he didn't talk about church, but about God.

Proclaim it. Jesus has risen from the dead and is alive and is amongst us bringing us new life. This is good news! This is a message the whole world needs and we are entrusted to proclaim it.

Our passage says this about those who proclaim, who talk about God, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" I bet you never thought of your feet as beautiful! If the Gospel can make your feet beautiful, imagine what it can do in the hearts of those who hear from you.