

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...”

They are the last words of Christ in the gospel according to Matthew.

For two thousand years they have been the church’s mission statement.

But if most of us were honest, we would probably admit that “making disciples” is not at the top of our “To Do” List on a daily basis.

That may be why my favorite joke about Presbyterians is,

“What do you get when you cross a Presbyterian with a Jehovah’s Witness?”

“Someone at your door with nothing to say!”

Making disciples, evangelism is not something we are famous for.

As Sharon Kay George noted: “Most Presbyterians think evangelism is something for Baptists or Pentecostals, or Fundamentalists?”

Evangelism may not be one of George Carlin’s seven words but with Presbyterians, the “E” word is at the top of the list.

Loren Mead, one of the most influential main line church consultants has gone so far as to say we should get rid of the “E” word entirely.

It carries too much baggage, too much freight.

He says, “Let’s simply cut evangelism out of our religious vocabulary.

If someone brings it up, let’s make sure people understand,

“That’s not what we do!!!!”

Biblical Scholar, Tom Long in his book Witness, explains

most people who go to church have a lot of good reasons for steering clear of evangelism.

First and foremost, many Christians don’t want to do more harm than good.

They’ve seen evangelist road kill,

they’ve spoken to friends who want nothing to do with organized religion because of some zealous evangelist who was one part used car salesman,

and two part hypocrite.

Long tells of a fundamentalist Christian who when greeted with a sociable, “Hello, how are you?” Would normally respond, “Saved, How about you?”

In the barber shop, the grocery store, the street, it was always the same,

To all greetings, he’d offer a big empty grin and a loud,

“Saved, how are you?”

He no doubt considered this social greeting to be part of his witness, but Long said, “The truth is, you just wanted to smack him.”

I think Mark Twain had this type of Christian in mind when he said,
“Oh yes, I know him, he’s a Christian, in the worst sense of the word.”

Nobody wants to be the person who everyone avoids at the water cooler or a “Christian in the worst sense of the word.”

So where does that leave us?

Every time we baptize a child we are reminded that Jesus said,
“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit” And somewhere deep inside we know that evangelism is not only important, it is necessary.

But I have a suspicion that most of us would rather let the evangelism committee or the pastor be the “designated evangelist.”

Long makes an interesting point in his book, subtitled Talking ourselves into Being Christian.

He discusses the power of speech.

He describes the first creation account in Genesis and the power of speech.

God says, “Let there be light!” and there is light.

And in the same way that God's speech has power to create, he says our speech has power too.

Our speech not only expresses our desires and our interests.

Our speech reminds us of who we are.

Our speech not only says something about us but it does something to us.

Our speech shapes our lives and calls us forward.

Now, Long doesn’t advise replying to someone’s question, “How are you?” with “Saved, how are you?”

But he does implore the Christian community to find words that are honest and authentic!

There is a great danger for Presbyterians notoriously nicknamed the “Frozen Chosen,” if we don’t have a vocabulary to share something that is deeply important to us,
we are at risk of losing part of who we are.

So if words are that important, how do we develop a vocabulary to honestly express our love for God and our love for Christ?

Put another way, What should evangelism for the rest of us sound like?

Here are a few possibilities.

It may be easiest for us to be an evangelist for this community.

When asked about this church I frequently say,
“It’s an amazing community.”

When I think of the mission that many of you are engaged in
or are considering,
or when I consider the ways that friends with demanding careers
or busy families make room for families in need,
Or when I see the selfless giving of retirees,

I often say, “It’s an amazing community; you wouldn’t believe their
kindness **and** commitment.

Perhaps one of the ways we speak about our love for God is being ready to respond to
friend’s observations.

When someone asks “Why did you go to Southpark?
Or why do you go to church?
Or why did you go to the Gulf coast?
Instead of shrugging our shoulders,
perhaps we respond, “It’s a tangible way to put my faith into action!”

Perhaps, we commit some scripture to memory that gives us words that accompany our
deeds.

It could be as simple as

I John 3:1 “See what love God has for us, we are to be called children of God and so we
are.”

Or I John 4:7 “God is love, and those who abide in love, abide in God, and God abides in
them.”

Or Matthew 25:40 “Christ said, ‘Whenever you did it to the least of these, you did it to
me.’”

Saint Francis is right, we should preach the gospel every day,
and if necessary use words.”

Most of the time we will be silent,
but eventually
preaching will require us to say *something*.

And because speech not only expresses our desires,
but it shapes who we become, we should be prepared.

This could be the end of the sermon, but I have to say one more thing.

Let me begin with a question,

“When did Christianity go from being persecuted band of believers to being one of the major religions of the world?”

For years, the most common answer to this historical question of Christianity’s rise focused on Constantine.

The traditional response describes 313 as the beginning of Christendom when Maxentius faced Constantine at the edge of Rome.

On the eve of the battle at Mulvian bridge,

Constantine had a dream in the night.

He saw the letters of the name of Christ with the words,

“By this sign you will conquer.”

Trusting this vision he had the letters for Christ, Chi-Rho,

painted on the shields of his soldiers and went into battle against a much larger army, won control of the West,

and then remembered to whom he owed his victory.

Romans gods were cast out and Christ was brought in.

But here is the question posited by Rodney Starks in his new book The Rise of Christianity,

“How did Christianity go from a collection of small house churches to a group so significant that Constantine would dream of their Savior,

the soldiers would rally around Christ’s symbol,

and the people of the Roman empire would embrace Christ’s teachings.

Starks investigates the much ignored second and third century and uncovers what happened during that time.

Two horrible plagues ripped through the West and in particular Rome.

What he finds is an amazing affirmation of Christian witness.

During this time, the people fled for their life

and abandoned the city to avoid the plague.

But one group did not flee.

One group stayed through both plagues to care for the afflicted.

You guessed it.

The Christians stayed

and cared for the sick.

Inspired by Christ,

encouraged by one another,

they stayed.

Rodney Starks points to the Christian’s presence during the plagues of the second and third century as the long forgotten back story to the rise of Christianity.

So I charge you, friends and Presbyterians in New England.

Go, offer a grace filled witness.

Preach the gospel every day, if necessary use words.
Sing in the choir,
share a meal with a newcomer,
express your love for God in word and deed.

Be prepared to offer a word of Easter hope, in a Friday world,
and who knows?

Perhaps God is even calling you to go to care for those that everyone else has abandoned.
Perhaps God has named you, named us
as the ones who care for those everyone else has forgotten.

Remember Jesus' final words:
"Go and make disciple of all nations,
and remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

There is no greater call and no greater promise!

Amen