

## Celebrating Stewardship of Witness Sunday, 10/15/17

**1** Today we conclude our journey together of reclaiming stewardship as a joyful, life-long calling. My hope is that each one of us has grown in some way, either in our stewardship of time, stewardship of money, or stewardship of creation. I don't mind telling you that today's topic, stewardship of witness, proved to be the most difficult to write, both because of the complexity of all that goes into what our witness is and because of all the hurtful ways Christians have tried to share their witness. Raise your hand if at some time in your life you felt that you were the victim of an overzealous witness for Jesus. I know I sure have been- in airports, shopping malls, at the front door of my home, and even on billboards. I always wince when I drive by a church sign that boldly proclaims the imminent damnation of sinners. I have one clear memory from my teenage years of sitting on a bench, by myself, inside the Ridgedale Shopping Center, when I was approached by two men. I don't remember what they said, but I do remember that they started asking me questions about my life without any real introduction of who they were and why they were talking to me. I felt harassed at the time and still wonder if that kind of "stranger" evangelism does more harm than good.

Fortunately, we don't have to share our faith in awkward or threatening ways. God has given each one of us a unique story to tell and a unique circle of friends and neighbors to share that story with. Debbie Bishop has a story to share that illustrates one simple way that God opened an opportunity for her to share the Gospel. **{Debbie Bishop shares two or three minutes}**

**2** So we all know that we're supposed to be sharing the Gospel, what the Bible describes as being "witnesses," but I'd guess many if not most of us would admit that we have some room to grow in this area of our faith walk. Perhaps that's because we've never been coached on what it means to be witnesses. While it's true that sharing the Gospel with words is only one way to do so, I think it's the way we tend to be the least comfortable with. Sharing the Gospel in words is really nothing more than expressing the way that God has touched our lives.

Do you recall that definition of stewardship I've been using? "Stewardship is receiving God's gifts gratefully, cherishing and tending them in a responsible and accountable manner,

sharing them in justice and love with others, and returning them with increase to the Lord.”<sup>1</sup> That same definition applies to our stewardship of witness. We’ve all been given the story of our lives and the story of God to receive gratefully, to cherish and tend. Cherishing and tending these stories is crucial, because just like with the stewardship of time and money, we can’t share what we don’t have. We cherish and tend these stories by exploring and rehearsing them, reminding ourselves who God is and who we are. When we’re able to share the unique combination of the story of God’s love and the story of our lives, and share them in justice and love with others, we are in effect returning those stories with increase to the Lord. We’re all called to be stewards of our stories and God’s story, with the ultimate goal being the glory of God.

Tending and sharing both stories is important because sharing the story of your life without sharing God’s part in it would be like offering someone a can of Coke without sugar or carbonation, nothing more than a can of colored water. Sharing the story of God without sharing how it’s shaped your own life is like describing to someone how good Coca-Cola tastes but not letting them try it for themselves. It might sound good, but without actually seeing it, how would they really know whether it’s something they want or need? We need to tend and share both God’s story and our story. The good news is that this is easier than you think, so keep calm, and let’s see if we can’t figure out how to do this.

**3** Let’s start with God’s story, as this is the part that’s already been figured out for us. I’ve never been a fan of handing out evangelism tracts, but some of them are useful tools we can use for ourselves as summaries of what we believe about God’s story. This one, “Life in 6 Words,” takes the word “Gospel” and breaks it down into six words, each word summarizing a key idea from a portion of the Bible. Don’t worry about writing these down because we’ve printed some cards for you to take home. You’ll find them in the lobby. See if this jibes with your idea of the big picture of the Bible. How might you summarize God’s story differently?

[G] God created us to be with Him (Genesis 1-2). [O] Our sins separate us from God (Genesis 3). [S] Sins cannot be removed by good deeds (Genesis 4-Malachi 4). [P] Paying

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<sup>1</sup> [http://stdunstan.ca/linked/the\\_difference\\_between\\_joyful\\_giving\\_and\\_stewardship.pdf](http://stdunstan.ca/linked/the_difference_between_joyful_giving_and_stewardship.pdf)

the price for sin, Jesus died and rose again (Matthew-Luke). [E] Everyone who trusts in Him alone has eternal life (John). [L] Life with Jesus starts now and lasts forever (Acts-Revelation).<sup>2</sup>

I like that summary of God's story. You might prefer a different one. The point is this: If we want to grow in our stewardship of witness, we have to be clear about God's story as it's been revealed to us in the Bible and the traditions of the Church. Let's see if we can take this simple outline and create a personal witness from it from my own life:

*[G] I think I've always known that God has wanted to be in relationship with me, even though I might not have been able to express that in words. I remember at sixteen feeling a tug on my heart, as if God was trying to get my attention. [O] The problem was, I ran from God, rejecting what I had learned in Confirmation class and avoiding church and even conversations about God. [S] Maybe I was afraid of God and God's judgement of the choices I was making. I definitely preferred serving myself rather than others. What did God have to offer me other than disagreeable rules and judgment?*

*The more I ran from God, the farther away from Jesus I became, and nothing I could do in this world would fill the emptiness of purpose and worth that I felt in my heart. [P] What I never fully realized, until I was about 30, was that God was pursuing me- not with a judgement gavel, but with a peace offering. If only I had turned to Jesus earlier, I could have tasted the relief of God's forgiveness and grace that was available to me and to everyone who wants it, all because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. I knew about God's law, but I had never met God and tasted God's grace fully until I came to accept Jesus as my savior and the Lord of my life. [E & L] I know that I'll enjoy a life in eternity with God and all the Saints when this body dies, and that's reassuring and hopeful to me, but the most surprising thing to me about being a follower of Jesus is that eternal life has already started. Each day I live is another chance to grow closer to God and to love God's people.*

If you were to write down your witness, what might it look like? How do you understand God's story? Would you use something familiar to structure your witness, like the Lord's Prayer or the Apostles' Creed, or are you more of a free-form story teller? How

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.lifein6words.com/the-g-o-s-p-e-l-message-explained/>

would you relate God's story to your story? I challenge you to give this a try this week and share your witness with at least one person, preferably someone you're already comfortable sharing with, perhaps even the person you're sitting with this morning. Your goal this week is to simply gain some clarity in your own heart and to take a step forward in your stewardship of witness.

**4** In his first letter, the Apostle Peter recognized that witnesses for Christ must live their witness with integrity in order to earn the privilege of being heard by others. That's why he wrote, "Keep your hearts at attention"<sup>3</sup> and "Keep a clear conscience before God."<sup>4</sup> And so witnessing, then and now, is most essentially a heart issue. It's only after our hearts have been filled with the Spirit of Jesus that our lives begin to conform to the image of Jesus, and it's only when we become more Christ-like in our lives that our spoken or written witness becomes more credible.

Someone once wrote me about our "conformation" class, misspelling "confirmation." It got me thinking. In some respects, our confirmation class really should be a conformation class, striving to shape those lives into the image of Jesus, filling their hearts with Christian love so that their lives themselves become living witnesses, overflowing with the love of Jesus. Isn't that what we want for our confirmation students? Isn't that what we want for ourselves? As we allow more of God's Spirit to reign over more of our lives, our hearts simply can't contain the witness that wells up from within.

**5** Have you ever had one of those experiences with God when your heart just swelled up with love and you couldn't help but tell someone about it? One of those times for me was on a Unidos en Cristo weekend. That weekend changed me forever, and I know so many who would say the same thing. For months after that weekend I couldn't stop telling people about God's goodness. Would you like to know the big secret behind those weekends? They require you to set aside an entire weekend to do nothing but experience the intersection of God's story with your story. That's it. It's not the only way to grow your witness, but it sure is a powerful one. Maybe God is tugging at your heart today, nudging you to have that kind of retreat time devoted to God. Talk to me or to anyone else here who's been on one of these

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<sup>3</sup> 1Peter 3:15, The Message

<sup>4</sup> 1Peter 3:16, Ibid.

weekends, because we'd love to give you the gift of that experience (go ahead raise your hand if you've been a part of UEC, Cursillo, or the Walk to Emmaus).

We are stewards, appointed by God and gifted with a unique life story and the life-changing story of God. What will you do with those stories? There is such joy in the journey when we tend to our lives of faith and share them with others. I yearn for more of that kind of joy in my life. Don't you?



## *Buffalo United Methodist Church*

*...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!*



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