

## The BIG Questions Sermon Series:

How do we spread the “God News”, to those who don't believe, without offending?

Texts: Acts 17:16-34; and Psalm 133, Mark 3:31-35

Your question raises the subject of evangelism. How to spread the Good News, or “God News” is a subject that is difficult for many a thinking Christian.

Today, as many celebrate Mothers Day, we are aware of the pain moms and dads feel when their children have left the church family and seem to have dropped the faith they were raised in.

The way the question is worded shows your sensitivity and insight-  
“not offending” matters.

We have all encountered missionaries whose main aim is the conversion of people to someone else's understanding of the truth. If we have been lucky to have been spared this we have read about it in school books. “Not offending” was no consideration to the Christian crusaders; was no consideration to the radical Islamists nor to sectarian leaders who have arisen over the centuries in all faiths.

“Not offending” sometimes is still not even a consideration in evangelistic circles today;

I have heard about “friendship evangelism” for example.

Here churchgoers are encouraged to make friends with unbelievers, invite them for coffee and socialize with them and then seize opportunities to talk about God. What does not seem to occur to many in these churches is the potential to hugely offend, once the person finds out that the real reason you became their friend is because you want to share the God news with them, bring them to church on Sunday. I for one would be outraged if I found myself so used/ instrumentalised by someone who I thought simply liked me and truly wanted to be my friend.

So I appreciate the concern with “not offending”. It shows a mature understanding that sharing the Good News must happen in a way which in itself is entirely as good and as loving as the gospel we believe in. Can the end justify all means? Absolutely not.

Yet, we sometimes think we should wait for a “weak” moment a person may have, to bring the conversation to God.

Pastor Bonhoeffer, interned by the Nazis in WW2, had become the unofficial prison chaplain to his fellow detainees. People trusted his quiet demeanour and spoke to him. Many tell him that in the horrors of the war they have lost their faith. Yet, when the bombs fall on Berlin even the atheists begin to pray again. Bonhoeffer realized how easy it would be for him to put pressure on these men in

their moment of fear to come back to God, to give their lives to Jesus, to repent of their unbelieving etc. But Bonhoeffer writes\*: We must meet an unbeliever in their strength, not abuse their moment weakness. And so, in these moments of terror he limits himself to simply share with them what gives himself comfort: he loves the hymns- he sings as the bombs fall, and holds the hymn book out for anyone to join in. He says his morning and evening prayers from the Psalms, and offers them up, for others to join in or ignore. He celebrates communion with stale prison fare and water. That which he does normally and which gives him comfort, he simply continues to do for himself in the presence of unbelievers. And offers these practices as comfort to others. invites them to join in or to leave themselves out; without being judged in any way. That is a witness born of respect.

What I take from this story is a first point I want to make in answering your question. Whatever it is that is your regular faith practice, don't give it up just because unbelievers are present. Just practice it, practice joyfully and be aware that they may be open to an invitation to join you. Whether they watch you, join you, or turn away in that moment, that is their decision to be respected.

The apostle Paul's missionary journey into the heart of Greece is another story worth considering as we seek answers to this question. Paul seeks dialogue with a culture that thrives on exploring new philosophical ideas. He meets the people of Athens on their own turf, as intellectual among intellectuals.

He proposes that people listen to his new ideas about God, which the good people of Athens are only too eager to do. We can assume that, being well schooled, all understand the new concept of God that Paul shares with them: God in history, revealing God self to people progressively and becoming one of us in Jesus, suffering, dying and rising, to draw all of us away from materialism and idols, into a new community of love. They all intellectually grasp the concept, but do all become Christians? By no means. Not everyone's heart is moved. Some hold the ideas for outright ridiculous and move quickly onto the next philosophical topic. *“But some joined him and became believers, including the man Dyonisios and the woman Damaris.”* Acts 17:34

Ancient Athens, the city that worshipped beauty and youth and individual freedom had a lot in common with the mentality we find again today: that sense that everyone is in charge of their own happiness. Choose a way of life that makes you happy we hear over and over. How could one belief be right for everyone? Ancient Athenians doubted that very much and so does the West today.. Just like in Athens, only a small portion of people today will be the kind for whom the message of the kinship of all in Christ, the idea of the kingdom of God and the person of Jesus are worth exploring more and more. Realistically we must know that the gospel will not appeal to everyone. Even if you do everything right only some people will embrace the good news. Christian faith is at home at the margins.

But let me ask you the question of Why. Why do you want to share the God news of your faith?

A couple of reasons are not good ones:

For example: Are you afraid that unbelievers will go to perdition?

If so, quickly they will notice that the attention you give to their soul is born out of your fear. Since they do not share the faith you have they do not share the fear you have. Why would they turn towards your faith if they see that it makes you afraid?

So, you can not share Good News born out of your fear for another person. Especially not, if that other is your child or grandchild. Nothing annoys our children more than a parent's plan for their lives. If that plan includes religion that is born out of the parental fear that the child might not cope well in choosing her own path- no chance.

Another not so good reason is nostalgia. If sharing the God News is just to re-live your fond memories of the past and to want to see your loved ones embrace a lifestyle that you remember fondly- your memories will not bring anyone closer to God but yourself.

So why do you want to share the God News? That question you must answer for yourself.

Hopefully the God News are Good News for you, give you Joy and strength and comfort as they did to pastor Bonhoeffer.

Find the point of how the God News makes a difference in your life – how the Faith in Jesus' way helps you love more, hope more, and embrace a way of living that is freeing you .

Perhaps you feel incompetent to voice this, to put it in words, but you help with the refugees every week. Perhaps you are a person of action rather than words. Still, try to link what you do with what you believe and find the words.

If you use words, use your own. Trust your own experience. In sharing “God News”- You need to be authentic.

You can not just repeat formulas like “he died for our sins” or “he created the world” or “God wants to save you” without conveying to the person you are speaking with what this means for you. If you just repeat these formulas its of course much easier, but you will either offend, or leave people totally cold.

The hardest thing I found when I trained licensed lay preachers was to get them to get away from the churchy language. They felt that once they were in the pulpit they needed to talk the talk...but it would leave the listeners cold. They had heard it all before! What does this gospel mean for you?! I wanted to shout. What difference does it make in your life?! In the way you get out of bed in the morning or go to bed at night? In the way you cope with the world news? In the way you love your difficult kid??? Why does the Christian faith make you happy?

I think that it took even me quite a few years to find my authentic voice as a preacher.

I also think that it is essential these days to know the basics of our faith.

Correcting misconceptions of the faith in non believers is an important task for us .

Sadly, those who have never come back after a childhood in church and those who have never been to church often have an extremely messed up idea about what they think Christian faith is. You would not believe how these folks assume we are all clinging to

antiquated, bigoted and outlandish ideas, such as the big man in the sky who manages everything and whom we can manipulate with our prayers.

We do not expect of others that they find Christian faith as meaningful as we do, but we can expect that others check their prejudice and open themselves to the great variety of Christian Spirituality that is out there. We can expect that people have an open mind and if they think Christians are judgemental, we should be able to expect at least that they do not judge us until they've heard us out.

If you feel rusty or can not articulate the basics of your faith, then you can seek conversation with your minister and attend study groups.

Be in touch with yourself: What is it in the Christian Faith, that gives you Joy, strength, hope on most days? Is it the person of Jesus? Is it prayer? Is it your church community? Is it ....??? Here I come back to the practices. What is it you must do, to feel connected to yourself, to Jesus, to God? What is it you can not live without? What in the Christian Life, if you lost it, would make you immensely sad? Those are the things even our children and grandchildren are still sensitive to, even if they have long stopped to go to church with us. It will really help if you've thought about these things so you can share them when asked.

Maybe you realize that you have starved your faith, assumed that it would always take care of itself, and now its weaker than you would like...

Being honest about one's doubts and struggles is part of reviewing what faith in God means to you. You can also be a powerful witness to the faith when you are in touch with your questions. You do not need to cast them aside. But you do need to give it some attention. Faith, like any meaningful relationship, needs nurture and attention.

So, at the basics you need to be able to articulate what it is that has a strong positive hold over you – and you need to say it in your own words, not in words borrowed from someone else.

Trust your own faith journey I say to you this morning...If you feel you've not got it all together that makes you only all the more real to an unbeliever. But don't forget to probe for the joy, and to firm up the practices that sustain your faith.

In closing, take a simple example: Grandchild, in his twenties, distant from church; glad that Sunday school and confirmation are finally over. On to better things- raves and parties, hard work and partnership, and child on the way.

Grandmother: lifelong church goer and active Christian; loves the hymns, the worship services, loves Christian art and music. Prays every night quietly for the world and her loved ones, including the grandchild. But when he comes to visit rarely does the topic of church or Christian faith come up. More private than sex and money is the topic of one's faith. Intensely personal. It requires trust to open oneself, we are vulnerable when we speak about how we believe in God, or not.

But Grandmother shares every once in a while with grandson what she does- what gives her strength, what she heard in a sermon that made sense to her, how she loves the organ music, that she keeps a postcard of a Jesus statue next to the picture of the grandson and

she shares that she prays for the grandson's happiness and well being almost every night. Every Birthday she sends him a Christian Blessing together with a gift. And grandson appreciates that because he loves her. She has been incredibly good to him in his twenty some years, and so he trusts her.

Her faith never offends. It is humble and gentle and whatever is voiced is born out of genuine love for a grandson who lives in a new generation in a new world in a place far away. This grandmother's love does not make grand statements, but when the grandson occasionally says why he can't believe in God, it is usually a statement that shows a blatant misunderstanding of the Christian message. –Then she sets him straight.

“You don't believe in a man somewhere in the universe who controls everything? Well, I don't either! We don't have to think of God in that way, you see...?” -

The Gospel is a treasure and you have it, apostle Paul says, in the weak storage box of our body and our personality and our personal history. (2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 4) There is no one way for all of sharing the message. Trust the way of God in you, in your life and faith journey. And follow your desire to learn more about the gospel and to grow in faith and hope and prayer and good practices .

Last, but not least; you will want to be the faith you want to see in others.

You simply live your faith and your actions do speak.

You can also help create the kind of Christian community that you can be excited about.

You can help build the church you would be proud to invite a guest to.

Actions and practices speak louder than words these days.

And when it comes to God talk- be real, be caring, be honest, be yourself - always.

You won't offend and you will be a gift to all who care to spend time with you.

God will reach out to your loved ones through you.

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\* Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from prison. Edited by E. Bethge