

# SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Epiphany  
Year C

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February 7, 2016

Text: John 1:35-51

Title: “A United Methodist Path: The Way of Witness”

This morning we finish the series on what it means to be a United Methodist Christian when members promise to support the church with our prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness. We have addressed the first four promises and this morning we turn to the last promise and that is the vow to witness to our faith, to tell others about the good news of our experience with Jesus.

Thinking about sharing good news this last week, I thought of Facebook. I know there is a lot on the social networking site that is not good news. There are definitely weaknesses but a lot of good news is also shared. For instance, on July 15<sup>th</sup> this post showed up on Emily Garlinghouse’s page.



The next day, this one popped up.



And the next day, this one:



Then, the very next month, these showed up on Cailin Tactor's page:



And then in January, Fallon Wiles got into the act with these posts:



That one you can see was taken before they even left the hospital.



And then, not even two weeks ago, Grandma Tamara Klida puts this on her page:



A few days later new mom, Julia, adds this one:



This is what we might call “baby evangelism”! Sharing with the world the good news of this new life that has been given, doing it with joy, telling the story naturally and easily. This kind of good news isn’t hard to tell, is it? (I did, by the way, ask permission of all the parents to share

these with you this morning.)

Unfortunately, most of us, I suspect, don't think of evangelism in a positive light. Instead of thinking of it as telling someone good news, we think of it in terms James Harnish outlines in A Disciple's Path, the study upon which this worship series is based:

*The term [evangelism] has been so abused by slick preachers and manipulative politicians that people inside the church are afraid to speak it and people outside the church run for cover the moment they hear it. The feeling was captured by the bumper sticker that says, "Jesus save me ... from some of your followers." (p. 65)*

This negative view of evangelism plays out in this congregation when the nominations committee works at finding people to serve on the evangelism team. It's not an easy team for which to find people—and we are the church whose primary call it is to tell people the good news of God's saving presence in the person of Jesus!

What then does it mean, then, to for you and me to fulfill the vow to witness when we become a member of a United Methodist Church?

The word, "evangelism", comes from the Greek, *euangelio*, and means "good news", so an evangelist is simply someone who shares good news. That includes new moms and grandmas when they fill their Facebook pages with baby photos. When we have good news to share we want to tell everybody and invite others to experience the excitement the excitement we've experienced. That's evangelism whether you call it that or not. And the most effective way of sharing good news is in a personal way, one person to another.

In 2008 the General Conference of the UMC added the vow to witness when people join a congregation in order to underline the importance of an individual disciple sharing the love of God with others. It was added because while the UMC has been effective in our social witness, we have lost some of the Wesleyan passion for sharing with others on a personal basis the love of God as we know God in Jesus Christ. It is a reminder that the goal of our life in Christ is not just that we are saved but that we share God's profound love for all people beyond ourselves. To offer out witness is to express our love for God and neighbor.

John Wesley was passionate about sharing good news. In his writing "The Character of a Methodist", he proclaimed that Methodists "do good to all people" in every way they can. As James Harnish puts it:

*He was emphatic in saying that this went beyond meeting their physical needs for food and clothing. It meant that Methodists "do good to their souls" by inviting them to experience the love of God in Christ and by encouraging those who have experienced that love to continue to grow in their discipleship.*

This is one of the reasons I am so hopeful about our small group ministry. It's a way to invite spiritually searching people to join you and me to experience the good news of new life in Jesus Christ. It's another way to share the good news. So if you are one of those spiritually

searching people, I encourage you to indicate on your communication card that you are interested in a small group, and write on the line that says “other” something about your interest in joining a small group of people who are also searching and want to grow in your spiritual journey.

That’s what is happening in John’s Gospel, you know, when two disciples of John the Baptist take an interest in Jesus when the Baptist is a witness to Jesus being the Lamb of God. They follow him and Jesus asks them “What are you looking for?” It’s a great question for anyone making their way through life. Can you imagine Jesus asking you, “What are you looking for?” How would you answer that question?

For these two disciples, they answer Jesus’ question with a question, “Where are you staying?” Apparently, they want to get to know Jesus more deeply. Apparently, they have a hunger for a deeper relationship with him. They are searching for something Jesus has to offer. And so he says, “Come and see!”

I love this simple response to people who are searching. There is nothing complex about this invitation by Jesus, nothing manipulative or overbearing. There is no shouting or trying to convince. It’s a simple invitation to come and see.

Then after spending the day with Jesus, Andrew finds his brother, Simon Peter and tells him the good news that they have found the Messiah, the one anointed by God which is what Messiah means.

Jesus’ pattern is repeated the next day when Philip finds Nathanael and tells him:

“We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.”

And Nathanael offers his snarky response: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.”

In both cases there is no attempt to convince or manipulate anyone. It’s simply inviting the other to come and see for themselves. No pressure at all. All they are about is wanting the other person to come and join them to meet the One who was the answer to the searching that was already happening within them.

So what does it mean for you and me to be Jesus-style evangelists? James Harnish offers five suggestions:

1. Begin with friendship

We talked about this last year with [The Art of Neighboring](#) some of you might remember. Begin with getting a name and building a relationship. It’s not about manipulating anyone which no one appreciates and certainly none of us respond well to someone we think is trying to get close in order to get something. No, begin with an honest, Christ like love for the other person without looking for anything in return. Just care for the other person.

One of the challenges many of us face, of course, is that many of our friends already have committed themselves to Christ and our circle is set. So how do we share the good news with those outside our circle of friendship?

2. Listen, Listen, Listen

Follow Jesus' model when he asked the first two followers a question, "What are you looking for?" When Jesus spent time with the woman at the well later in John's Gospel he listened to the woman's story. Are you more interested in listening to another's story than sharing your own?

3. Know your story

When Philip finds his brother Simon, his approach is simple and direct when he tells him that we have found the Messiah. If the opportunity arises can you tell your own faith story of your experience of Christ in a simple, concise and clear way?

4. Offer the invitation

Again, Jesus simply invites the first two disciples to "come and see". And that pattern is repeated by Philip. The invitation might just be for the other to commit their lives to Christ, but it might also simply be inviting someone to join you in worship or to participate in a mission or ministry. Might be to join you in a small group. But it's always an open ended, non-manipulative invitation that begins growing toward a Christ-centered life.

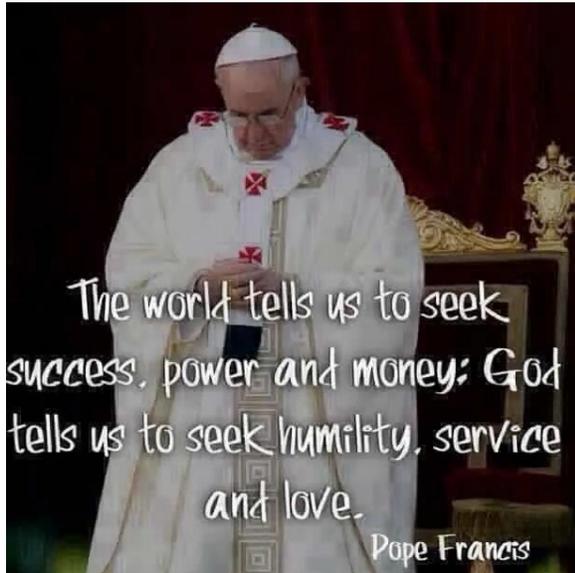
I attended another seminar with other pastors around the country this last week learning about family emotional processes and the way they affect congregations. One of the presenters was a marriage and family therapist from Virginia. A devout Roman Catholic, she talked about the kind of tension people of the church feel when it comes to family members who are not part of a faith community. Either we lecture because we are concerned about their spiritual welfare which seldom--if ever works--or we freeze up and say nothing because we don't want to offend and drive them further away. She had tried both approaches but then decided there was another way which is to be simply be yourself and do what you enjoy and include your children or grandkids if they want. Instead of freezing up or lecturing, just ask them if they want to go when you are going. Same thing with friends, neighbors. Offer grace, not fear or force. Invite, invite, invite! And she has discovered that when she is herself and enjoys what she is doing when it comes to the church, her kids and grandchildren want to come with her and her husband.

5. Trust the Spirit

Finally, trust the Spirit. When we trust in God's prevenient grace that is already at work in people's lives whether or not they recognize it, we make room for the Spirit's movement. People may be more ready than we sometimes realize to accept an invitation. We are the planters of the seed. We aren't responsible for the natural process of growth. Let the Spirit take care of that. But we are called to plant with the Spirit's help.

We have good news to tell! In my own life, I met Christ as a child in the church and continued to meet him in the people of the church, who loved me in ways that made God's grace, mercy and love real to me. Christ has guided me in life choices and led me to serve in ways that have given me a richness and depth I cannot fully express. Jesus is the way to God for me because he is love, because he loves the unlovable; he cares for those who are vulnerable, those who are broken and hurting, those who are oppressed by others and because he reminds me of

what Pope Francis is quoted as saying on another Facebook post:



We have good news to tell. I hope and pray that God gives us the awareness and the courage to share it as easily as we tell the world of our joy when a baby is born.