

**“Necessary Words”**  
**June 4 and 7, 2006**  
**John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15 and Romans 10:9-15**

I recently read an essay written by Deborah Griffin Bly in which she recounted the story of an unusual encounter she had at her workplace several years ago. At the time, Deborah worked as a salesperson in a religious bookstore. As she arrived at work early one morning she noticed a man waiting by the door to her shop. The man was dressed in the characteristic garments of a Hasidic Jew.

Very politely, the man asked if he could come in, and although it was at least forty-five minutes before the store normally opened, Deborah allowed the man to come in. After all, he was polite and evidently needed something right away.

After turning on the lights, Deborah asked the man, “Would you like any help?” In gentle, accented English the man answered, “Yes, I want to know about Jesus.” Deborah led the man upstairs, where she showed him her collection of titles on Christianity. She pulled out books by great theologians like E.P Sanders, Rudolph Bultmann, and Joachim Jeremias, as well as Albert Schweitzer’s *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*.

In her essay, Deborah describes what happened next.

After I showed him all the books we had about the historical Jesus and all the scholarly histories of Christianity, I started to go downstairs, but he called me back. ‘No (he said), I want to know about Jesus the Messiah. Don’t show me any more books – you tell me what you believe.’

Deborah was being asked to do what she had almost never been asked before: to put her faith in Jesus into words.

Deborah describes her startled response with these words:

My Episcopal soul shivered. I gulped, and told him. I told him everything I

could think of...as much as I could sputter out in my confusion, in the dark. (1)

“My Episcopal soul shivered.” Isn’t that a great line? I imagine that our response might well have been, “My Presbyterian soul shivered.” We understand Deborah’s discomfort, don’t we? Deborah was asked to do what we Presbyterians often find so difficult to do: putting our faith into words.

Our Gospel lesson for this Pentecost Sunday is John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15, which may be found in your red pew Bible New Testament on page 110. Our reading for this morning makes it clear that sometimes it is necessary for us as Christians to put our faith into words. According to our text, sometimes we are called upon to testify. Let’s listen now for God’s Word to us.

- Prayer: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The Gospel text that we just read contains both a promise and a commission for us as followers of Christ. The promise given here, and expanded upon in other sections of John’s Gospel, is clear. Jesus promises that when he leaves the earth he will send the Holy Spirit. We understand that the Holy Spirit, in the words of our Presbyterian Study Catechism, “is the personal bond by which Jesus unites us to himself, the teacher who opens our hearts to Christ, and the comforter who leads us to repentance, empowering us to live in Christ’s service” (2).

The commission that we are given in this text is to go into the world and testify about Jesus. Our commission seems straightforward enough, but what does it really mean to “testify” or to offer testimony about Jesus?

As always, when we seek to understand the meaning of any word or concept, it is helpful to understand what it doesn’t mean. To testify or to offer testimony about Jesus

in some religious circles simply means telling the story of how a person came to faith or “got saved.” While that is certainly an important form of Christian witness, to testify or to offer testimony about Jesus means so much more than simply sharing how we came to faith.

To testify most simply means to tell the truth. Before a person gives testimony in a court of law, they must swear before God to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Similarly, as his followers we are commissioned to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth about Jesus. We are called to speak truthfully about what we have seen and experienced as followers of Jesus Christ.

Now, if you were listening, you heard me right. I said that we were commissioned to go into the world and *speak* truthfully about Jesus. Friends, are your Presbyterian souls shivering yet?

I know what you’re thinking! Do we have to use words...do we have to speak about our faith? Actions speak louder than words, right? Can’t we just let our actions testify to Jesus? There’s got to be someone else who is more qualified than me to speak about Jesus. I’m not sure what I would say. I don’t want to turn anyone off. Are words really necessary?

It is traditionally believed that St. Francis of Assisi once said, “Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words.” St. Francis makes a valid and important point. Scripture clearly emphasizes that our actions do matter, and they are a powerful way we bear witness to our faith in Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, I think that St. Francis clearly understood that there would be times when words were necessary in order for us to tell the whole truth about Jesus.

Our first Scripture lesson for today certainly underscores the reality that in order for people to come to know and experience the love of Christ, someone must use words to tell them. Listen again to Paul's haunting questions in Romans 10. "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?" Paul concludes this section of Romans 10 by emphasizing, "So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ." (Romans 10:14, 17)

If faith comes through hearing, and hearing comes through the word of Christ... someone has to speak the word of Christ. And that someone is you and me and everyone who, like us, has experienced the love and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ in our lives. We are called. We are commissioned to go and testify.

This call and commission to testify is not just extended to the super saints, the articulate, or the theologically astute. The call and commission is extended to the young and old, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, strong and weak, male and female. It doesn't matter. If our life has been touched by the love and grace of Christ, we are called and commissioned to testify.

I am constantly amazed and blessed by God's ability to use most unlikely people to powerfully testify to the love and grace of Christ. In both Scripture and real life, God often seems to call unlikely people to testify. An example from Scripture immediately comes to mind. You may remember the story in John's Gospel of the woman that Jesus encountered at a well in Samaria. The woman had been married five times and was currently living with another man. She wasn't exactly a saintly, pillar of the church type. But she had an encounter with Jesus that changed her life. Jesus knew the truth about her

life, and yet, still cared about her, and offered her hope of new life. She left her water jug at the well and made her way back to her city to tell people about this Jesus who changed her life. The Scriptures tell us that “many Samaritans from that city believed in Jesus because of the woman’s testimony” (John 4:39). Powerful testimony from a most unlikely source.

During our Urban Mission Retreat last summer, many of us heard moving testimony from an unlikely source. The first night of the retreat we went on a Nightwalk with Jerry Schwab and toured several downtown ministries. Our last stop before going home for the evening was at Truth Ministries, an emergency shelter for the homeless on Sprague Avenue. It was late. I was definitely tired and ready to call it a night, and I almost skipped this last stop. I am so glad I didn’t. The man in charge of the ministry that evening shared the story of how Christ had transformed his life and led him to be involved in this emergency shelter. He was a small, understated man. His speech was plain, but I found his words energizing and life-giving. His testimony blessed and encouraged all of us who heard it. Again, powerful testimony from an unlikely source.

The woman at the well and the man at Truth Ministries both offered powerful testimony. You might ask, “What made their testimony so powerful?” My simple response is because they spoke necessary words...words about Jesus, his love and grace, and his ability to forgive and give hope, his ability to heal, transform and make people whole.

They spoke necessary words. Words that you and I came to hear this morning. Words that draw us back here every Sunday morning or Wednesday night. You know the words. You’ve already heard some of them today. “In Jesus Christ we are forgiven and

made new.” “The peace of Christ be with you.” “This is the Word of the Lord.” You’ll hear other necessary words later. “Praise God from whom all blessings flow.” “The gifts of God for the people of God.” “The body of Christ...broken for you.” “The blood of Christ...shed for you.” “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” They are necessary words...words that remind us that we are loved, that God is with us, and that Christ has given us a new life of hope...words that we must hear each week...words of testimony.

And, friends, the world outside these doors longs for these necessary words. The longing of the people in our world is so clearly illustrated in a story I heard recently. A man who was a hospital chaplain attended a noontime Ash Wednesday service held in a church near the hospital. During the service, the pastor made the sign of the cross with a mixture of oil and ashes on his forehead. When he returned to the hospital, ashes still in place, he began to visit patients.

One of the patients, a woman, noticed the ashes on his forehead and, thinking it was a smudge of dirt, grabbed a tissue, spit on it, and said, “Come here, hon, you’ve gotten into something.”

The chaplain avoided the tissue and said, “No, they’re ashes. They’re supposed to be there.” She looked at him, puzzled. He began to talk about the meaning of Ash Wednesday, how the day meant that God was with us when we were weak and vulnerable, how we were but dust, ashes, and God was with us, taking us toward Easter even when life was broken, tragic and sad.

The woman thought for a moment, and then she said, “I think I want some of that.” The chaplain slowly reached to his forehead, borrowing some of the ashen smudge, and with his finger traced on her forehead the sign of the cross. (3)

The world outside our doors wants some of what we have seen and experienced. There’s a longing for love, grace, mercy and peace. Will we testify to the love, grace, mercy and peace that we have found in Jesus Christ? Will we share the necessary words that will point people to our source of hope, Jesus Christ? May it be so that all honor and glory may be given to the One who has been revealed to us as Maker, Redeemer and Friend. Amen.

Notes:

- (1) Coalter, Jr., Milton J. “The Craft of Christ’s Imperfect Tailors,” *Theology Today*, Vol. 50, No. 3, October 1993, p. 7-8.
- (2) Presbyterian Study Catechism, Question 54.
- (3) Long, Thomas G. Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004, p. 126-127.