

## ACCOUNTING FOR HOPE

Scriptures: I Peter 3:13-17; Mark 9:2-9

One of the trickiest parts of serving Jesus at work or school is figuring out when and how it is appropriate to share your faith. Pastors never have to worry about that. We are paid to share our faith. We are supposed to share our faith at our job. But for you it is not that easy.

Earlier this month the on-line edition of the *Times* of London carried a story about a nurse named Caroline Petrie. The article said,

Mrs. Petrie, an evangelical Christian and mother of two, was suspended after her employers discovered that she had asked a patient whether she would like prayers to be said for her. Although the patient was not offended, the incident was reported. Last week Mrs. Petrie, who was supported by the Christian Legal Centre, was summoned to a disciplinary hearing on the basis that she had failed to demonstrate a “personal and professional commitment to equality and diversity” by offering her prayers.

Later the hospital reversed its decision and reinstated Nurse Petrie. The article said,

North Somerset Primary Care Trust [the hospital’s administrative body], said that it recognized Mrs. Petrie had been acting in the “best interests of her patients”, that nurses did not have to “set aside their faith” in the workplace and could “continue to offer high quality care for patients while remaining committed to their beliefs.” The trust also admitted that, for some, prayer is recognized as an “integral part of health care and the healing process” (*The Times On-line*, Feb. 7, 2009).

There might have been a time when this would not have been an issue, a time when everyone was assumed to be a Christian and that offering to pray for someone in a hospital would have seemed natural. But we no longer live in a time like that. We cannot assume that everyone around us is a Christian or would welcome an offer to pray for them.

In 1997 an organization called Mission Spokane did a survey in Spokane County of how many people actually went to church on a given Sunday. They chose an average Sunday and asked every church to report their actual attendance on that day. Then they added a generous estimate for any church that did not respond. They discovered that the church attendance that day for all churches of all denominations in Spokane County was 75,589. That is an impressive number until you realize that is 18.4% of the population. On that day less than one out of every five of your neighbors went to church. On that day less than one out of five of your co-workers went to church. On that day less than out of five of your classmates or the kids on your soccer team went to church. And if your soccer team practices on Sunday, it was even less.

You people sitting in church this morning are a minority. You are like immigrants in a foreign culture. And if you want to share your faith with other people at work or school, you have to be careful and wise in how you do it.

But this is not new for Christians. The same thing was true for Christians in the New Testament. The first verse of the first letter of Peter says, “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to

the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia.” This letter in the New Testament was written to Christian exiles dispersed in foreign countries. They were a minority in their culture, just as we are. So how does Peter recommend that they go about sharing their faith?

Turn to the back of the bulletin, and look at I Peter 3:15-16. Peter says, “But have reverence for Christ in your hearts, and honor him as Lord. Be ready at all times to answer anyone who asks you to explain the hope you have in you, but do it with gentleness and respect.”

There are two lessons to be drawn from these verses. First, we have to be gentle and respectful when we share our faith. If Caroline Petrie had insisted on praying with the patient, or if she launched into a speech about how the patient needed to get right with God, that would have been disrespectful and coercive and probably would have done more harm than good. But according to the story she asked if the patient would like to have a prayer, and when the patient politely declined, she left it alone.

Anytime we begin to talk about our faith at work or school, we have to be gentle and respectful. But here is the key. Peter says, “Be ready at all times to explain the hope you have in you.” The key to sharing the Christian faith is to share our hope.

I think most of us, if we think at all about sharing our faith at work or at school, think about doing it through our actions. We try to show our faith by our conduct—by being honest, kind and helpful. Peter talks about that further on in this scripture passage, starting in the middle of verse 16. He says, “Keep your conscience clear, so that when you are insulted, those who speak evil of your good conduct as followers of Christ will become ashamed of what they say.” Being honest, respectful, and compassionate to other people at work or school is important.

But let’s be honest. If we expect anyone to believe in Jesus because of our conduct, because we are such good examples of Jesus in daily life, we are kidding ourselves. Aren’t we? The central premise of the Christian faith is that all of us are sinners, even those of us who go to church, *especially* those of us who go to church. That is why we begin every worship service with a prayer of confession. We are not here because we are good. We are here because we need help; we need Jesus! In other words, we are here not because of our goodness but because of our hope. We are here because we believe that God can do something good in our lives and world through Jesus Christ, even in a bunch of messed up sinners like us.

In Dante’s poem *The Inferno* there is a sign over the entrance to hell that says, “Abandon hope, all ye who enter here.” Losing hope is another word for hell. Giving people hope, whether at work or school, is giving them a taste of heaven.

Let me share another story. This is from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s book *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. At this point in the story Tom, a black slave, works for a master named St. Clare. St. Clare’s young daughter Eva has just died. Tom, who was very close to Eva, comes into the house to see St. Clare, who is bent over with grief. St. Clare said,

“Oh, Tom, my boy, the whole world is as empty as an eggshell.”

“I know it, Mas’r—I know it,” said Tom; “but, oh, if Mas’r could only look up,—up where our dear Miss Eva is,—up to the dear Lord Jesus!”

“Ah, Tom! I do look up; but the trouble is, I don’t see anything, when I do. I wish I could.”

Tom sighed heavily. ... [Sometimes we share our faith by sharing someone’s sighs!]

“Who knows anything about anything?” said St. Clare, his eyes wandering, dreamily, and speaking to himself. “Was all the beautiful love and faith only one of the ever-shifting phases of human feeling, having nothing real to rest on, passing away with the little breath? And is there no more Eva,--no more heaven, --no Christ,--nothing?”

“Oh, dear Mas’r, there is! I know it; I’m sure of it,” said Tom, falling on his knees. “Do, do, dear Mas’r, believe it!”

“How do you know there’s any Christ, Tom? You never saw the Lord.”

“Felt him in my soul, Mas’r,--feel him now! Oh, Mas’r, when I was sold away from my old woman and the children, I was jest a’most broke up. I felt as if there warn’t nothin’ left; and then the good Lord, he stood by me, and he says, ‘Fear not, Tom;’ and he brings light and joy into a poor feller’s soul ... I know it couldn’t come from me, ‘cause I’s a poor complainin’ cretur;; it comes from the Lord; and I know He’s willing to do for Mas’r. ...

Sometimes we share our faith by sharing someone’s sighs—sharing the struggle and heaviness of their heart, as Tom did. And sometimes we share our faith by sharing our own story: how God has given hope to us through Jesus Christ, and that is also what Tom did. And sometimes we share our faith by praying for others, as Caroline Petrie did. That is also what Tom does in this story. Tom said to St. Clare,

If Mas’r would only pray!”

“How do you know I don’t, Tom?”

“Does Mas’r?”

“I would, Tom, if there was anybody there when I pray; but it’s all speaking unto nothing, when I do. But come, Tom, you pray, now, and show me how.”

Tom’s heart was full; he poured it out in prayer, like waters that have been long suppressed. One thing was plain enough; Tom thought there was somebody to hear, whether there were or not. In fact, St Clare felt himself borne, on the tide of his faith and feeling, almost to the gates of that heaven he seemed so vividly to conceive. It seemed to bring him nearer to Eva.

“Thank you, my boy,” said St. Clare, when Tom rose; “I like to hear you, Tom; but go, now, and leave me alone: some other time, I’ll talk more.”

Tom silently left the room (pp. 327-329).

Be ready at all times to explain the hope you have in you. Sometimes we share our faith by sighing with people when they are sad or depressed. Sometimes we do it by sharing the story of what God has done in our own lives. Sometimes we do it by praying for those who do not have the words or faith to pray for themselves. Be ready at all times to explain the hope you have in you, but do it with gentleness and respect.

- Ken Onstot  
February 22, 2009