

Sharing the Gospel; Sharing Our Lives **1 Thessalonians 2:1-8**

FOCUS: The gospel travels best of webs of loving, honest, transparent relationships. This is the calling of congregational life.

FUNCTION: To tell the story of how this passage has come to be a major theme in my Ministry of Word and Sacrament.

Sermon

By the fall of 1997, I was largely **disillusioned** with Christianity
-- **confused**, and therefore **frustrated** about this faith
that had otherwise been a part of my life since childhood

And this **dilemma** of both mind and heart
was hardly **soothed** by the fact that I was, that fall,
1/3 of the way through my **seminary coursework**

That puts a certain **pressure** on a person
Let's just say **disillusionment** is not a trait
most PNCs are looking for in a seminary grad

The root of my philosophical vexation likely could have been traced all the way back to my freshman year in college

During a year of undergraduate study
on a large, state university campus in Louisiana

I was desperate for some Christian fellowship

so I hooked up with a certain **campus ministry group**

before realizing that their chief activity together
was **hard-sell, cold-call evangelism** in the many
high rise dormitories dotting the campus

{knock}

Would you be interested in a personal relationship with JC?

PAUSE

There are **certain combinations** in the created world
that seem to go together quite naturally

OXYGEN AND HYDROGEN, FORMING WATER

FRENCH FRIES ON SALADS

APPLE CASTLE DONUTS AND SATURDAY MORNINGS

(these are all naturally occurring mixtures)

But let's just say that a **mild-mannered Presbyterian teenager**
and **door-to-door evangelism** is not one of them

I did it, for a year.

But I hated most every minute of it.

The chief problem for me was not so much talking to others about Jesus Christ

In high school I had experienced a somewhat dramatic **sense of call** to go to seminary, to enter pastoral ministry

This was a **strange turn of events** to try to explain to my pack of high school cronies

(In Roman Catholic South Louisiana, seminary = priest, and priest = celibacy, and celibacy was unconscionable to a bunch of high school boys)

So I had already grown accustomed to the idea that being **closely** and **publically associated** with a Savior made one a bit of an odd duck

No, what troubled me wasn't **talking about Jesus**

so much as it was the **way** we talked about Jesus

- Going door to door
- Handing out little pamphlets
- **Fixating** on the number of doors knocked upon and the number of commitments garnered

We would meet monthly in a large group meeting to compare totals; implicit competition among the dorms

All of this **conspired** to make me feel as though we could have just as easily been going door to door **selling**

laundry detergent

or insurance

or drugs

The worse part: When someone made a commitment, no follow-through

So fast forward, then, half a decade, to the fall of 1997

I was working my way through seminary

Trying to **make some sense** of several **incongruent** pieces of Christian faith floating around loosely in my life

giant **tectonic plates** that resisted melding as they rubbed against one another with friction

- There was the **gentle, familial Christianity** of my childhood: the nurture of two loving and placid Presbyterian congregations. A warm, cozy Xian communion that now seemed somewhat naïve and something of a fuzzy dream. *Was genuine Xian community possible? I was no longer sure.*
- There was the aforementioned freshman year of college: experiences of evangelism that had left me more **creeped-out** than clarified. Based on experiences in my life ... I knew I wanted to talk about Jesus, but I also knew I didn't want to talk about Jesus like that. *Was there such a thing as a respectful, faithful, loving way to share this faith with others? I was no longer sure.*
- And still there was another reality vexing me: There was all around me now, in seminary, a number of fellow students (future pastors) who seemed quite content not to talk about Jesus at all. In a kind of superior way, there seemed for many a certain pride in not being **tarnished** by faith. Many were passionate about lots of big ideas—SOCIAL JUSTICE, INCLUSIVITY, MORAL INTEGRITY. But I couldn't shake the feeling that those words could seem awfully **secular** at times, somewhat **vacuous** in meaning. *Could the church be sustained on deconstruction? Could Big Ideas replace the gospel? I was not certain at all.*

*So in the fall of 1997, I found myself around a table
with half a dozen other seminarians*

working through a course entitled

Theological Foundations for Evangelistic Ministry

P616 in the Columbia Seminary catalog

And as the professor **pushed us to clarify** what, exactly,
were our theological foundations for evangelistic ministry

(or any ministry, for that matter)

my **personal crisis** came to a head
my disillusionment and frustration boiled over

I have no idea! I said → *I'm so confused.*

I know I want to say something

something about what I read in the NT ...

something about what I have experienced ...

something that has something to do with the faith
in which I was nurtured in both home and congregation

But I don't want that something to collapse

into **empty, shrill** ideas on the one hand

or **manipulative arm-twisting** on the other

How do you keep this faith from **eroding** in either direction?

How can you be a Christian without being a **detached elitist**
on the one hand and a **zealous nut** on the other?

I just can't make any sense of it anymore.

To my great surprise, my professor broke from his notes

and recounted a few stories of his own about the problems
and pains of **flash-in-the-pan evangelism**

He, too, had been forced to navigate between similar
vexing poles: MANIPULATION — VACUOUS IDEAS

And then he did something quite remarkable for a
seminary professor: he picked up a New Testament

He indicated that over the years he had found a
living correction to these challenges

in a small set of verses buried in the preface
to Paul's Thessalonian correspondence

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

*[Says Paul,] You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our
coming to you was not in vain, but though we had already
suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you
know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of
God in spite of great opposition.*

*For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or
trickery, but just as we have been approved by God to be
entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not
to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts.*

*As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with
words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; nor did we seek
praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, though
we might have made demands as apostles of Christ.*

*But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for
her own children. **So deeply do we care for you that we are
determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but
also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.***

It's difficult to describe certain moments in your life

without sounding melodramatic, cliché'

But all I know is that by the end of verse 8

We are determined to share with you both the good news of God and also our own selves, our lives— because you have become dear to us.

it was as if a **light** had come on in my head

I could see it again, after a long time of not being able to perceive what I was supposed to be about in pulpit and pastoral ministry ... Xian

What had been massive, **troubling disconnections** in my Christian journey thus far

three **stubborn islands** of experiences that would have nothing to do with one another

Suddenly in 1 Thess. 2 I caught a fresh vision for how they **might be subdued**

and **healed**

Reformed!

and brought together to form a vision in my mind of what the gospel could actually look like lived out among its hearers/believers

There is the Christ who calls us to a living faith in a living God

and there is the Christ who calls us into **living relationships** with one another

and those two **living realities**

THE GOSPEL (THE GOOD NEWS) — SHARING OF LIVES IN COMMUNITY

they are part and parcel of a robust NT Xianity

They keep each other **in check**, keep each other honest, true, living

Without **living relationships** of honesty, transparency, history

the gospel can easily **devolve** into a **sell-job**, a door to door product peddled by strangers to strangers

The message of Jesus becomes just one more commodity for therapeutic American consumers to digest and eliminate ...

We never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children.

Without the gospel, the story of God's claim and calling in JC, told and retold

without the gospel, our congregations and relationships can easily devolve into rather **secular, sanctimonious gatherings**

People come into our doors, hungry for another way, and all they find is just another version of **life-as-usual**, repackaged in liturgical garp

be it empty progressive ideology or chest-thumping conservative values

Without Jesus, we devolve into exactly what we already believe, **and our communion suffers**

So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.

On a Thursday morning, in the fall of 1997, with the help of an able teacher, and a timely word from scripture

it was like a **previously-locked door** was opened in my mind

and I could see a long, fresh road stretched out ahead of me

For the first time, someone brought it together for me

A **workable vision** of what the church could be,

and therefore a **workable vision** of what I was to be about as a teaching elder, preacher/pastor

-- a compelling burden to spend my days stirring up the pot of the New Testament

adding into the mix fresh batches of living relationships—community, congregation!

and then stepping back to see what would come out in the end

I could see that sharing the gospel means sharing our lives

and that through those two mediums God would choose to make God's grace and mercy known

As you might suspect

that professor was Darrell Guder, one of our guests today

Darrell took me under his wing gave me a **sustainable vision** for mission and ministry

— a vision that has carried me along every since

His **winsome intellect** and **warm friendship** were both used by God in my life to rescue me from a certain kind of despair

and 1 Thessalonians 2:8 has remained for me

one of handful of verses that keep me going in this work

I offer you this bit of personal testimony this morning

first, as a way of giving thanks for God's providence
 for the way God uses people to teach us
 guide us
 correct us
 encourage us
 along this Jesus way

Dr. Guder taught me that a **robust Christianity**

while deeply **personal**
 is never **private**

The living Christ that **claims us** in mercy
 is also the living Christ that **calls us** into relationships
 and that the two **work together** to bear witness

I will be **forever indebted** to mentors/friends like Darrell
 and forever grateful to God that we are not left stranded in our
 disbelief and doubt.

But secondly, and finally,

I also offer you this testimony today as a way of **making sense**
 of what you will hear from me
 in the coming months, seasons, and years
 we now have together

1 Thess 2:8 is the **filter** through which I pass
 almost everything I will strive to do with and for you

*Does it announce the gospel of God?
 Does it build up the life/relationships of this cong?
 Are we open to God using both to be a witness and blessing to
 others in need?*

May it be so, New Wilmington church

may it be that

every sermon, every sacrament
 every relationship, every activity
 every word and every deed
 of our common life together in faith

be **witness to Jesus Christ**
 and a blessing to this **particular gathering** of his people

All for the sake of those God would have us bless

*So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share
 with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves,
 because you have become very dear to us.*

May it be so.