

SHARING THE GOOD NEWS STORY

Matthew 5: 38-48; I Peter 3: 13-16a

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Our Story is connected to Jesus' story. Last Wednesday at Vacation Bible School, I had the opportunity to be the teacher for the Bible Story Time. I had five groups come in, each for 25 minutes. I had one of our youth, Melanie McCallum, as my classroom assistant. I was talking to the groups about Jesus, and specifically how Jesus knows us by name. I asked them to consider for example, how Jesus was walking along and said to the man in the tree, "Zaccheus come down, I am going to your house for tea!" I asked the kids if Jesus knew his name because Zaccheus was wearing a name tag. In one voice the kids responded and said, "Noooooo". How then did Jesus know Zaccheus' name? "Because God made him" was one of the responses. Then I asked, "Does God know you by name?" The answer from the groups was a resounding "Yes". That is incredible considering there are so many people in the world! In spite of whether you are rich or poor, short or tall, male or female, sick or well, God knows you. We are connected to Jesus whether you believe in Him or not. He knows us so well because he made us! Our life story is connected to His!

A story about radical love and forgiveness: What is Jesus' story about? Jesus is about love and forgiveness to those He created. From our scripture reading Matthew 5: 38-48 (taken from the Sermon on the Mount), Jesus is saying that the people are not to participate in the practice of 'an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth' as the religious teachers had interpreted and taught from the Old Testament scripture (Exodus 21 and Deuteronomy 19). Rather, Jesus teaches not to repay violence for violence or evil for evil. Jesus taught the crowd that they are to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them. Jesus stated that everyone loves those who love them back. But loving your enemy is what really makes a difference in the world. Forgiving, and praying for those who are against you – your enemies (or perceived enemies), is what builds bridges and brings healing and reconciliation into the world. To make Jesus visible to our community, we want our congregation's culture and our personal life stories to more closely resemble Christ's story.

A story about existing for others: Author and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, *"The Church is the Church only when it exists for others...not dominating, but helping and serving. It must tell men of every calling what it means to live for Christ, to exist for others."* Jesus does not want the church to be an exclusive club. When we take our eyes off Jesus, there is a temptation for this to happen.

No one owns this church. It does not matter if you have been here for your whole life, or if you have just come, all of you are the body of Christ and equal members of it. This is Jesus Christ's church and we are all equal members of his family. The new members who are joining today have consistently expressed the welcoming spirit and joy they experience here. I am so thankful to God to hear that! When people in the community discuss Oakridge Presbyterian, we hope that the conversation tells the story of a church where the people follow Jesus by loving one another; where the people are welcoming; and where they strive to help and serve the community and those in need. When this

story becomes evident, people will be curious about the Gospel of Jesus and will want to hear more.

I have told my children so often that one of the greatest benefits of the church is that you can travel anywhere, and attend a church service, or seek out church leaders and they will assist you because that is what Christ requires His church to be! No church does this perfectly, but they are definitely engaged by Jesus to do so – even if those they encounter are enemies! Sadly, one hears stories where a church is like a club; they are not welcoming and could not be bothered to help people they do not know.

A story about encouragement, not condemnation: In Matthew 7, Jesus gives the teaching against being judgmental and hypocritical. In Matthew 7:2 Jesus says, *“Why do you see the speck in your neighbour’s eye and do not see the log in your own eye?”* In other words, look at your own sin before you start judging someone else. The temptation is so there.

I have heard it so often among our congregants that one of their favourite parts of the worship service is the silent prayer of confession. When we pray this prayer of confession, we ask the Lord how we have contributed to the problems in society by the things we have done or the things we failed to do. We may have failed to help someone in need or we saw injustice and merely looked the other way. The prayer of confession puts one back into reality. When we are aware of how we have contributed to the problems in the world, we tend to blame others less. I think the saying by Tony Campolo is spot-on: “Love the sinner, hate my own sin.”

Certainly, we are to discern and make judgments, but only in the light of God’s Grace as we know through Jesus Christ. This Grace seems ‘reckless’ and ‘over the top’ compared to our common understanding of Grace. When people feel judged, they will not be drawn to the liberating faith in Jesus Christ.

Be prepared to share your story: In our reading in I Peter 3, Peter said to his readers that doing good should not bring criticism or harm from others, but even if it does, you are blessed. There will be people in our culture who will take exception to the biblical message. In some cultures, one will be persecuted for sharing their story. Peter was encouraging the people he was ministering with, to not be afraid - to keep going and be prepared to give an account for the hope they have in Jesus. In verse 15-16 Peter says, *“Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you. Yet do it with gentleness and reverence.”* The fact that Peter said...’*yet do it with gentleness and reverence*’ shows Peter’s transformation from one who in a rage, cut off the ear of Malchus (the servant of the High Priest Caiaphas) who participated in the arrest of Jesus (John 18:10). Remember the story? Jesus gently healed the man by restoring the ear. The message through Peter to us today, is to not be patronizing and judgmental of others when telling your story, but do it with love – gentleness and reverence!

Peter was a changed man. People saw the change and wanted to hear his story. Has the Good News of Jesus changed your life and is changing your life now. Do people see the change and are curious and ask why you have the hope in life that you have? Have your words ready so you can tell your story. Amen.