

A few years ago we were vacationing at a lake, enjoying the morning on the front deck of our condominium, sipping coffee and watching a pair of woodpeckers fly back and forth, feeding a nest full of woodpecker chicks.

We greeted a family walking by, and a woman trailing several yards behind paused as she passed and, without so much as a "Hello," or a "Good morning," blurted, "Do you know Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and savior?"

We both nodded and said, "Yes," because it's true; but also to get rid of her. I still feel a bit guilty about that "get-rid-of-her" part. After all, wasn't she just doing what Christians are supposed to do: bearing witness to her Lord?

You know, there's an effective way and an ineffective way to do anything. There's also a counterproductive way. It's one thing for someone to share with me about Jesus; it's another thing altogether to feel like I've been run over by a truckload of turkeys.

In the middle of the 20th century, an approach that, until then, had been effective in "winning souls," "leading people to Jesus," "adding to the church," gradually became counterproductive, and eventually was doing more harm than good.

It was never the content of the message. A word about Jesus is never bad. Times change. And, while the content of the message doesn't change, the method of delivery must relate to the hearer's situation. When missionaries go to different lands and cultures, the first thing they do is learn the language and culture. The message must be delivered in a way the hearer understands.

The evangelistic language of 1950—it's vocabulary and concepts and images—is meaningless three generations later. But after 50 years of decline in every manifestation of Christianity, the vocabulary and method remain unchanged. Christian evangelists and witnesses simply doubled down—we just need to work harder: doing the same thing and expecting different results.

Methods increasingly became market-driven, and were perceived by many, right or wrong, to be motivated more toward "success" than "obedience;" more toward "stars in my crown" than toward the one who placed the stars in the heavens; more strategy-oriented than Christ-oriented.

And as the decline continued, the blame too often was placed on "them": the hearers; the public; but never on the messenger or the method of delivery.

Again, it was never the content of the message. "Do you know Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and savior?" is still a valid question.

Of course, we must be careful in referring to evangelism that we don't confuse lifting up Christ with adding numbers to the church. The two, indeed, are related; and yet, they're separate. Three generations of counterproductive evangelism and witness, rather than drawing people to Christ, have driven people away, creating what Thomas Bandy calls "the largest and

fastest growing spiritual population in North America: the spiritually yearning, institutionally disillusioned public". That population generally calls itself, "spiritual but not religious," and rejects virtually all expressions of organized religion.

I grew up in a church that emphasized witnessing and evangelism; and the logo of our Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is the cross of St. Andrew superimposed over a communion chalice. Andrew was the first evangelist: John reports that the first thing he did after meeting Jesus was find his brother and bring him to Jesus. Jesus final words to his disciples, according to Acts 1, were "...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

So, evangelism remains important in the church's ministry. What still is lacking is an effective method. Two of today's Lectionary readings offer what I propose as a basis for an effective method of evangelism and witness. Listen:

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| <p>ACTS 17: 22-31 (NRSV) <i>Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, ²⁵nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries</i></p> | <p><i>of the places where they would live, ²⁷so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.' ²⁹Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. ³⁰While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."</i></p> |
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Thank you, Amy. Notice that before he addressed the Athenians Paul took time to learn something about them, and he found a way to connect with them: "*I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.*"

Paul is not ambushing them with some memorized testimony; he's not regurgitating somebody else's experience. He focuses on what he knows about the Athenians and starts there. Do you think he had their attention?

And if we read on, we'll see the results (vs. 32): "...some scoffed; but others said, 'We will hear you again about this.'" And then note what Paul did (vs 33) "*At that point Paul left them. But some of them joined him and became believers...*"

He didn't hang around and push his agenda like a time share salesman; he trusted the Word he had shared—he trusted in Jesus' promise: "*If I am lifted up, I will draw all people to me.*"

A 1996 movie, "Jerry Maguire," was about a sports agent whose high-pressure self-marketing approach turned off a lot of people, and he struggled to stay in business. He falls in love,

but that same hard-charging personality is a problem in the relationship. There's a spat—an argument, and he storms off in a huff. After cooling down, he realizes what he's giving up, and goes back. He walks in on her in the middle of a Tupperware party, but ignores the crowd and starts in on his rehearsed speech. Finally, she interrupts and says, "You had me at 'Hello'."

Sometimes we just need trust the message. Share it and let it go; and trust Jesus for the results.

And the second reading from today's Lectionary:

I PETER 3:13-22 (NRSV) *Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? ¹⁴But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, ¹⁵but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; ¹⁶yet do it with gentleness and reverence.*

Thank you, Stacey. Effective Christian witness is never intrusive. "Be ready to tell every-one who asks..." Paul found the Athenians' question in the objects of their worship. I don't know how many times on an airline flight I've been asked about some aspect of faith. "What are you reading?" "What do you do for a living?" I rarely need to initiate a conversation about faith. During conversation, no matter how casual or how intimate the relationship, "Be ready to tell everyone who asks..."

"Be ready." In seminary, we had to write our "Personal Credo." I encourage you to sit down and write out your own "Faith Story." Review it often. Share it with a close friend or relative. Get feedback. Be ready. You don't need a degree in theology, or a memorized list of scriptures (although the right Scripture used the right way will be useful). Just tell your story: "This is how I experience Christ..."

One of our elders shared a story on Facebook: An emotionally stressed man pulled through McDonald's for a cup of coffee, and he broke into tears when he noticed cuts on the wrists of the young man who handed him his coffee. The young man in the window asked "Sir, are you ok," and the weeping man replied "I'll be ok if you just promise me to keep fighting. I can see your peace has been shattered and your happiness has been stolen, but God is getting ready to grant you a joy that can never been taken from you."

He pulled away and just sat in the parking lot to pull himself together. 5 mins later the young man came running out to his car weeping and asking, "Pray with me, Sir! Today is the first time in four years I've felt that anyone cared for me."

It wasn't a theological treatise; it wasn't a memorized "Plan of Salvation;" it was just tears and a plea: "Please don't give up, because God hasn't given up on you."

And the text from Peter's epistle concludes "**...do it with gentleness and reverence.**" Nothing hurts a Christian witness like an unChristlike arrogance or rudeness. Remember: we're sharing about a man who washed his disciples' feet. Share your witness with anyone who asks, and do it with gentleness, meekness, reverence, courtesy, and respect. Isn't that the way Jesus

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would do it?