

(How) Should I Speak About My Faith?

1 Peter 3:8-17

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Today we begin our annual Faith Questions sermon series. This marks the fourth year where, for roughly the stretch of time between Epiphany and Lent, your questions set the sermon agenda.

This year the questions took a while to trickle in but eventually there were enough for a short series.

I suspect this has more to do with the fact that our minds seem to be dominated by the pandemic this year, but Kevin had an alternative theory when I mentioned that there weren't many questions yet in mid-December. He said, "Well, I guess you've answered all our questions!"

He was joking, of course. But his comment did spark a more serious reflection.

This series (and past series) are not about you providing questions that I as the "expert" then "deal with," kind of checking them off the list and then moving on to the next one, eliminating all your questions about faith one by one, year by year.

Of course, this isn't how things work. Questions of faith are more stubborn and persistent than that. I have no illusions that my sermons each year represent comprehensive treatments of any of the questions that have been raised.

At best, I hope that they are one helpful response (among others) that help you as you walk the road of faith. Perhaps they offer a few ways to think about things differently. Maybe they remove a few obstacles or irritations. Sometimes, maybe all they do is clarify the question or spur on new ones!

Christian faith is not like math where you plug in the right data and the formula works properly.

We are often dealing with deep mysteries that have kept far keener minds than mine busy for all of Christian history! There is (or should be) a measure of humility built into the task.

Last Sunday, those of us who gathered for worship on Zoom heard a sermon by AMBS president David Boshart.

The topic of the sermon was faith formation and at one point he said something along these lines: “Never underestimate the importance of creating caring spaces for questions in the church.”

That’s what this annual series is about. Creating caring spaces for questions in the church.

I believe that questions are important. Honouring them and addressing them honestly in the context of community is one of the ways in which faith, hope, and love are strengthened.

Questions are also a good sign that faith is alive and kicking (and sometimes screaming in protest!).

Questions are not an imposition or an unwelcome intruder in what ought to be an otherwise tranquil experience of the life of faith. They are part of the landscape. They are part of what it means to be limited creatures who will never know everything and who seek to live in relationship with the God of the universe!

This is why I chose the image that I did for this sermon series. Each week, Helen hunts around for an image for the front of the bulletin that will reflect something of the theme of the morning. Often, I make her task difficult 😊

For this series, I said we should just use this image for the next five Sundays. It’s an image that speaks to me about what it means to walk the journey of faith.

The forest speaks to me of the basic truth that the best way forward in faith and life isn’t always immediately clear. There isn’t always as much light as we would prefer.

There are obstacles, uneven terrain. Life circumstances throw up unanticipated questions or highlight old questions in new and urgent ways.

Sometimes the questions dominate our view more than the end goal. Sometimes questions seem more abundant than answers!

And yet, the forest remains a beautiful place. There is greenery and goodness. There is peace and stillness and a proliferation of life. There is adventure and surprise!

And—this might be the most important part—there is enough light on the horizon to continue to make our way. We are not doomed to just keep blindly wandering around the forest crashing into questions and never making any progress.

We will never know everything in the life of faith—questions will never entirely disappear. But we can know enough to trust God to keep going.

Our first faith question this year has to do with how we should speak about our faith.

Why do we sometimes find it hard or even undesirable to speak about our faith?

Is it because we're nice, polite Canadians and we want to fit in and not be singled out? Do we not wish to cause offense?

Do we worry that we don't understand our faith well enough to share it?

Do we think that our actions ought to speak more loudly than our words? This is a big one for us as Mennonites (the "quiet in the land").

Do we lack conviction in our own beliefs? Are we embarrassed about our faith or about those who profess it most loudly?

Perhaps we don't like the way that faith is often cheapened and degraded in public discourse. Maybe the idea of "evangelism" conjures up images from our childhood of over-eager missionaries eager to add another convert to their checklist.

Maybe we have seen too many examples of eager Christians objectifying people and treating them as means rather than ends.

Perhaps, particularly in our time and place, we worry about how Christianity is coopted for unsavoury political ends, or is associated with violence and xenophobia, or any number of other things we'd prefer not to be associated with.

[As an aside, it has regularly struck me as ironic in more progressive Christian circles that people who would never dream of talking about their faith with another human being (that would be oppressive or judgmental or an imposition!) have no problem whatsoever talking about their political views and correcting those whose politics differ from theirs! We might ponder what this says about what we think is more important...]

At any rate, there are many reasons why we might be hesitant to speak openly about Jesus.

But we also know that the church has grown throughout history as ordinary Christians have borne witness to the difference that Jesus made in their lives.

We know that good news is for sharing, not keeping to ourselves. We believe that we have been commissioned by Christ himself to be his representatives on earth.

So how (and when and why) should we speak about our faith?

The person who submitted these questions ended their email with these words: "What is Jesus telling us today? Should we speak up more or differently about Jesus?"

That word "today" is important because speaking about faith looks and sounds different depending on our context.

In our passage from 1 Peter this morning. Peter is writing to a small church mere decades after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The church was facing a good deal of persecution from a hostile Roman Empire. Christianity was seen as a despised, foreign religion that was still a pretty new thing. Peter is writing to people who were slandered and misrepresented regularly.

In this context, Peter urged the church to live such exemplary lives that those who hurled abuse and threats toward them would be put to shame. The way of Jesus, living like Jesus, was its own witness.

This was a common theme of the early church throughout the first few centuries of its existence. We see this in writers like Cyprian, who was Bishop of Carthage in the third century:

Beloved brethren, we are philosophers not in words but in deeds. We know virtues by their practice rather than through boasting of them. We do not speak great things, but we live them.

Or Origen of Alexandria, a theologian from the second century, who said:

Christ makes his defense in the lives of his genuine disciples, for their lives cry out the truth.

Similarly, Peter urges his church to let their actions speak of your convictions. Don't repay evil with evil. Seek peace and pursue it, turn from evil, do good. Be *eager* to do good.

So, we should emulate Peter and the early church, right? We should focus on actions at the expense of words.

Well, not so fast. Peter also instructs the early Christians to "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect" (1 Pet. 3:15-16).

What does it mean to do this in our time and our place? We live in a complex cultural moment characterized by over-familiarity with faith, with caricatures and misrepresentations of faith, with ignorance about faith, and with extraordinary apathy toward faith *all at the same time!*

We are a long way from the first century Roman Empire. The church is no longer a tiny, persecuted community in a hostile Empire. Christianity is a global religion claimed by over 2 billion people.

We live in a nation and are inheritors of a culture that has been profoundly shaped by the Christian story, whether we realize it or not. Many of our ideals, institutions, and convictions (about human rights, for example) are deeply Christian in origin.

And yet, we often hear that the West is becoming “post-Christian.” The church’s influence has been waning as our culture becomes more secular. Biblical illiteracy is the norm (inside and outside the church, sadly).

Intolerance, division, and hostility thrive in a media context where it is increasingly difficult to sort out fact from fiction, truth from error, persuasion from propaganda.

This is the world we live in. And in this strange context, the question of how to speak about our faith is a complicated one.

On the one hand, we perhaps prefer to remain silent and not be associated with some of the loudest and most obnoxious voices that lay claim to the language of Christian faith while exhibiting behaviour that we feel has nothing to do with Jesus.

Like the early church apologists, we perhaps intuitively feel that we should be philosophers of deeds not words. Deeds speak more persuasively, we feel. Words are cheap and easy, perhaps now more than ever in the age of digital media!

On the other hand, there is desperate need for people of deep faith to offer a compelling and attractive vision of Christianity. The answer to the problem of too many ugly representations of faith out there in the world is not to stop speaking but to offer a better alternative, to portray Christian discipleship in ways rooted in the love and beauty of the Jesus and his way.

This is true in our relationships with our neighbours and co-workers.

It is true in our churches. We need to speak about our faith with one another, not in formulaic ways that try to adhere to some imagined template, but with honesty and transparency.

It is true in our families. I think that many parents speak very little about their own faith to their children. We sort of just hope the church will “take care of it” for us. But this doesn’t really work.

James Penner is a sociologist of religion in Canada and has done all kinds of studies of young adults coming and going from the church. If he could reduce his findings to a simple phrase, he once told me, it would be this: “Faith is caught, not taught.”

This might be a simplistic way to put it—part of how we “catch” faith obviously involves teaching.

But what he's getting at is that the research says that kids who hang on to their faith are most often those who see it making a meaningful difference in their parents' lives. It's not a taboo topic of conversation in the household. Questions are welcomed and honoured.

We also need people who are willing to tell the truth about the human condition, about why things have gone wrong and go wrong in the world, about why we so often fail to live up to our highest ideals.

We need to talk honestly about the shadow side of the world and ourselves, particularly in a culture that sees the self at the center of everything.

We need to talk about sin, in other words. Interestingly, we live in a cultural moment where sin-talk hasn't been abandoned but transferred to another register.

We seem eager, both inside and outside of the church, to talk about certain sins "out there" in the culture or the church (racism, sexism, intolerance, misogyny, oppression, etc.). We are not as eager to talk about the sins that beset us personally (lust, greed, sloth, envy, etc.).

So, we need to offer attractive visions of Christian faith to counter all of the ugly ones. We also need to speak honestly about hard and unflattering truths. We need to point always to the God revealed in Jesus Christ rather than the idols that we prefer (the self being chief among them).

And we need to not only speak but to listen. God is not absent from the lives of those who claim no faith. We must recognize and honour this, too.

We have much to learn from others. We should never forget that we follow a God who delights in speaking in unexpected ways and from unanticipated sources!

All in all, this can sound like a daunting task. That was a lot of "need to's" I just went through. Can we really keep all of this straight?!

in the end, I don't think there is a one-size-fits-all answer when it comes to questions like how, when, why and to whom we should speak about our faith.

Each of us is wired differently and inhabits different webs of relationships and contexts. In some circumstances, most faithfully bearing witness to the hope of Christ might mean keeping our mouths shut and letting our lives speak.

At other times, being willing to openly and honestly give verbal witness might be precisely what the situation requires.

I do believe that, in response to the question, “What is Jesus telling us today?” that Jesus is certainly telling us what he has always told us.

Don’t be afraid. Follow me with your whole lives. Make disciples. Trust me. I am with you always to the very end of the age.

We aren’t all born evangelists. But we can all bear witness to how we have encountered the love of Jesus in our own lives.

It’s interesting that Peter doesn’t say, “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a defense of the Christian religion and why it’s better and truer than all the others.”

He says, instead, be prepared to give a reason for the hope that *you have*. It’s an invitation to speak personally not offer a legal defense.

Ultimately, we speak most persuasively and compellingly when we speak personally. I know this to be true as someone who has spoken about God to others for a living for almost thirteen years now!

I can have the most magnificent sermon with the most well-researched arguments (in my humble opinion!). More often than not, if people remember anything it’s when I share from my own story.

May God help us to speak of the hope that we have. May the Spirit of Christ increasingly knit this hope into the fabric of our lives so that our speaking and our living will bear witness to the goodness and truth of his gospel.

Amen.

