

Date: January 20, 2008

SUNDAY: Ordinary 2

SERMON: Show and Tell

Text(s): Isaiah 49:1-6; John 1:29-42

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Anyone who's been around small children for any length of time knows that whatever they see or hear, gets repeated for all the world to hear. I suspect the reason "Show and Tell" time is such a sacred ritual in kindergarten or first grade classes is simply that every teacher knows there's no way to prevent the kids from telling everything they know, so they might as well try to structure it as a learning experience. When Carol taught that age child, she always made a bargain with their parents: If you don't believe everything you hear about what happened in class, I won't believe everything I hear about what happened at home.

This was very graphically demonstrated in her kindergarten class in Malaysia during our years there. One day, the kids were "sharing" during their show-and-tell time, and little Daniel reported that something happened the night before at his house that made his mother cry. This precipitated a heated debate over the question of whether or not mommies can cry. You have to imagine this debate being carried on by five-year-olds, whose language skills were not yet fully developed, and for most of whom English was only one of two or even three languages in use at home. That made it even funnier. But finally one little girl named Lulu Wong had the definitive last word. She gave an eyewitness testimony that corroborated her little classmate's story. It so happened that Lulu's mother was a judge and her father a doctor, so both parents were well-known and influential in the community. In a very authoritative voice Lulu announced, "True! Mommies can cry. Last night my daddy shout my mommy, my mommy shout my daddy, my daddy shout my mommy, my mommy cry!"

That testimony opened a whole new world of knowledge to some of those children

who had never seen a mommy cry before. It also provided a hilarious story for the teachers' lunchroom that day.

There's nothing quite as convincing as personal testimony is there? Our Gospel lesson this morning reminds us that testifying to what we've seen and heard is central to our baptismal vocation as the people of God. John the Baptist's first words about Jesus are, "*Look! Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. . . I have seen and bear witness that this is the Son of God.*" The theme of bearing witness to what we have seen and heard is one of the most prominent themes in this fourth Gospel. When John the Baptist says, "*I have seen and bear witness that this man is the Son of God,*" he's not talking about something obviously apparent about Jesus— Jesus doesn't have a halo around his head or angels flying around him. John is testifying that he has experienced something in his encounter with Jesus that has changed him in some way. And implicit in his testimony is the invitation to others to encounter Jesus themselves, so that they, too, may experience for themselves at first-hand the transforming presence of God.

John testifies to what he has seen, and as a result of his testimony, two of his own disciples, one of whom is named Andrew, stop being part of John's movement and begin to follow Jesus instead. When Jesus sees them following him, he asks them, "*What are you looking for,*" and when they tell him, he invites them, "*Come and see.*" So they do. They go with Jesus and see for themselves in his company what John the Baptist saw. Andrew, so our narrator tells us, then goes and finds his brother Simon Peter, and says, "*We have found the Messiah.*" Peter also comes to see for himself, and the rest, as we say, is history. From that point on, Peter becomes the leader of the band of Jesus' disciples, and his brother Andrew drops back into the shadows of the story, but it was Andrew's hearing of John's testimony that led him to investigate this man Jesus for himself, and on the basis of his own encounter with Jesus, he

went and found Peter.

I think we have here a model for how any of us and all of us come to faith, and how that faith is passed on. Whether we were born into a Christian family, raised in the church, taught in Sunday School, and nurtured in worship or whether we grew up as cheerful pagans until we somehow received the testimony about Jesus from someone else, we all believe on the basis of having heard the witness of somebody and then have come to see for ourselves. St. Paul says, *“Faith comes by hearing.”* Hearing presupposes telling. The telling may take the form of an actual conversation with another person or through an account of someone’s experience we read in a book or watch in a movie, or through a sermon or through the message of a particular piece of music. Hearing presumes both a speaker and an audience. Coming to faith always is a social experience; faith is communicable. It is not only taught, but caught in the interaction of people who share what they’ve seen and heard. It’s one of the reasons, for example, why we pair up each of the young people in our confirmation class with an older member of the church who acts as a mentor, someone who’s able to have significant faith conversations.

Barbara Lemmel, who was the pastor of a circuit of three small rural churches in the Adirondacks, has written about an experience she had on her day off one week, fishing in the headwaters of the Hudson River. It was early one summer morning, when she saw something white a little ways downstream that seemed to be floating on the water, but then realized that it was moving upstream against the current.

She could see it was some sort of animal, but couldn’t see anything except a pink nose and some ears above the water. But then, when it was only a couple of yards from her, it had to climb over a partially submerged rock, and as it came out of the water, she saw the wide flat tail and recognized it as a beaver— a rare, albino beaver.

She was so awed by this sighting of an all-white beaver, that she gave up fishing that morning and went home and called as many people as she could find whom she thought might be interested, including the regional forest ranger and a river guide who knew the local wildlife very well. When she asked if any of them had seen a white beaver, they all said no, they hadn’t, though all of them envied her experience. “You didn’t happen to have a video camera with you?” asked one. She was feeling frustrated that there was no one who had shared this singular experience, and she tried to think of other people she could call who might have, but it finally dawned on her, she said, that there was no one else who could corroborate her story. *“I was the only one out on the river at dawn on that cool, foggy morning, I was the only one who’d seen the white beaver. I’d have to be content with my own experience. But I wished I had company.”*¹

She went on to make the point that often our experiences of God are like that— they tend to be singular, deeply personal events, and trying to share them with others is complicated and often frustrating. Our encounters with the Holy are beyond the power of mere words to describe adequately. Even when we try to put our experience into words, if only for our own benefit, we’re aware that there is a large gap between our description and the experience itself. We have to learn to be content, in some measure, with having had the experience ourselves, but often we wish we had company. And, in fact, despite the complications and frustrations, sharing such experiences with others seems to be an essential part of their meaning. Probably the best reason anyone ever joins a church is that it’s one of the best places to find others who have had their own experiences of the Holy. Faith, like misery, loves company.

Just because encounters with God are so singular, so personal, so difficult to communicate adequately, the temptation is always to not speak of them at all— to retreat into an individualistic,

privatized spirituality. I spoke with a young woman who told me, “I don’t go to church, because I do my own spiritual thing.” One doesn’t have to look very hard to see that this is probably the prevailing option in our contemporary society. Particularly here in New England, I think, most of us are reticent about talking to other people about something that we regard as personal and intimate as our spiritual life. Spirituality, by which we mean those experiences of encounter with the Holy, with Ultimate Mystery, which we Christians name God, is often held to be purely a private affair. We are extremely reluctant to talk about what we’ve discovered to someone else for fear of being thought intrusive. It would be presumptuous on our part to think that what we’ve found, is what someone else might be desperately searching for. In the great consumer-friendly supermarket of spirituality, it’s each shopper for herself or himself. And yet, when we fall into that temptation to “do our own spiritual thing,” we discover that we’re in a very lonely place. We wish we had company.

Whatever else we are, we are social beings. We do not have the option of living our lives in splendid isolation from other people. Anything that touches us, particularly those things which touch us most deeply, the mystery of life and our consciousness of our mortality are something that we share with everyone else as well. “*No man is an island,*” the poet John Donne, proclaimed, and no matter how hard we may try, we cannot escape that incontrovertible truth.

If the need for community is an essential part of our humanity, it is also essential to the nature of Christian faith. To confess faith in Christ is to confess that he is “*the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world,*” as John the Baptist puts it. Likewise, in the Servant’s Song we heard from the prophet Isaiah, God says to the Servant, “*I will give you as a light to the Gentiles that my salvation may reach to the ends*

of the earth.” The world, the whole world, is always in view whenever we speak of God. And if I believe that God cares about the world, then I cannot reduce the world to what’s going on in my private inner life. Whatever else it means to be a Christian, it has to involve my life in the world in relation to everyone else around me. I think this is what John Wesley meant when he said, “I know of no holiness that is not social holiness.”

Another way of saying this is that while Christian faith *is* deeply *personal*, it is never *private*. The gospel of Jesus Christ is a very public proclamation of what we understand about what God is doing and has done for the whole world. The gospel is not identical with Christianity as a religion. If that were so, then we should probably not waste our time talking about it, for the Christian religion has probably been at least as responsible for perpetrating horrible things in the world as every other religion or ideology. The gospel is about what God’s love for the world, and about what God has done and is doing through Jesus Christ to heal and renew that world. The gospel is about God’s justice and righteousness becoming the realities by which people and societies live. The gospel is about life that is more powerful than death. The gospel is about the power of sacrificial love. If the gospel is true, it is true for everyone. The very word gospel means “good news.” News, by definition, is meant to be shared. That’s what makes it news. And if the news were not good, it wouldn’t be the gospel. The world is dying to hear some good news. We live in one of the loneliest societies in the world. We long for intimacy, and yet we live isolated from one another, and isolated even from our deepest selves. People are dying for a life that has authenticity, for the possibility of love and real intimacy. Why do you think internet sites like YouTube and FaceBook and MySpace are so immensely popular. In our fragmented, media-driven, over-consuming society, we’ve lost the ability to form

real embodied communities, so we settle for virtual communities in Internet chat rooms with the help of digital photographs.

Where will the world find the intimacy and authenticity and genuine experience of community it yearns for if not in the fellowship of those who are learning to be transformed by the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world? And how will they know about that transforming fellowship if not from those who care enough to invite them to “come and see.” I sometimes wonder if the most important reason the mainline Protestant churches have been steadily declining in recent decades, is that we have lost the urgent sense that was present in an earlier day that we “have a story to tell to the nations”—a story that has the power to change the world.

So how do we go about this business of bearing witness to what we have seen of God in the face of Jesus Christ? I don’t suggest we take a page from the Mormons or Jehovah’s Witnesses and start going around knocking on our neighbors’ doors and handing them evangelistic tracts or forcing on them unwanted conversations. What we can do is be prepared when an opportunity presents itself to simply offer a simple, personal word of testimony. When our colleague in the office says, “Why on earth do you waste a perfectly good Sunday morning going to church?” anyone of us can say, “Well, like everybody else, I’m trying to live the best life I can, and I’m discovering that my faith in God is really important in that struggle. So I go to church to get the support and encouragement I find in the company of other people who are facing the same struggles I do. Why don’t you come and see for yourself?” Who’s going to feel threatened by such a simple word of witness and invitation? Such a simple invitation can be very powerful. According to the American Institute for Church Growth, ninety-three percent of all people who come to a church, and eventually become practicing,

committed disciples, come the first time through the invitation of a relative or a friend— ninety-three percent. The gospel of Jesus Christ travels most effectively along the natural social networks in which all of us are located. Are we, in those relationships, living lives of such openness and hospitality and integrity that others feel invited into our friendship and confidence? Do our lives prompt those around us who are looking for meaning, for purpose, for love to say, “Gee, I wonder what Margaret has that makes her such great person to confide in?” “I wonder what gives Jack the kind of integrity he has?” It is the invitational life that opens the door for the invitational word of testimony.

So, despite the difficulty of communicating experiences of God in human words, and despite our feelings of reluctance or reticence to speak of our personal experience of God, we are called, by virtue of our baptisms, to take our place in that great chain of witnesses, to testify both by word and deed to what we have seen and experienced of God’s love in Jesus Christ. And in giving witness to the Good News, however inadequate or fumbling our attempts, lies the ultimate hope of the world.

1. Barbara Lemmel, “Rare Sightings,” *Christian Century*, December 23-30, 1998, 1245.

