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Evangelism I:
West Valley Presbyterian Church
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What were Jesus' last words....really?

Today we begin a series on evangelism...

Now before we begin I'd like you take out the orange piece of paper that's in the little place in the pew in front of you where the prayer cards live...

Do you see it? Just take that orange piece of paper out right now and what I want you to write on one side the answer to the question that you see on the screen.

WHAT IS ONE OF THE MAIN THINGS THAT KEEPS YOU FROM SHARING YOUR FAITH WITH OTHERS?

You can stay anonymous. I don't care who you are...I will look at them though.- I just want get a sense of what some of the major challenges are here at WVPC...to doing evangelism..telling other people about Jesus. And I will use these cards as I write the message for next week...

Please put these papers in the basket in the foyer when you go out. But hold onto these papers because I am going to ask you to do something at the end of this time with them again...

Now I know that the word evangelism can really get under people's skin I know - both Christians and non Christians sort of hate this word. When I speak about evangelism it make Christians feel guilty because they think they are not doing enough of it perhaps - or they don't have the gift or "wiring" for it

And often it makes non Christians suspicious - some of them think about right wing fanatics who don't have a brain...who are judgmental and have certain political leanings, have a holier than thou attitude

Well, when a word like evangelical gets tossed around and begins to have a bad association (its sort of like what happened to the term born

again two decades ago) what we need to do is look at the word and reclaim it for what it actually means. Right?

I. EVANGELISM MEANS GOOD NEWS

The term “evangelical” comes from the Greek word, meaning “the good news”. But a lot of times people who call themselves evangelicals or who share God’s love with others are anything but good news.

I had a friend who saw a sign once that there was a worship service in a church near his home...and he was so excited because the church was called “**Evangelical Free**” – (IMAGE?) and he thought it meant free of evangelicals!

He later found out that this was actually the name of a denomination of Christians who called themselves evangelicals

He was so disappointed...

I remember living near a church, when I was a kid that always sent out people after church on Sunday with Black Bibles the size of the unabridged version of the Odyssey and Iliad combined – (IMAGE)

These people’s faces looked dour and

All puckered up ...They had suits on, the men had carnations in their lapels and the women had plucked eyebrows that made them look fierce – I was scared of those women as a kid

We’d see them coming a mile away and my sister and I would turn off all the lights and go hide in the attic until they stopped ringing the doorbell. We knew that if we let them in they would *never leave*.

The few times we did answer the door, they would always start out by saying, “Hi. We are evangelists from our church and we are here to share the gospel.”

Well both the word evangelist and gospel mean good news...but we didn’t have a clue that there was anything good about those people... they were nothing but bad news for us.

That’s sort of the underbelly image of evangelism that we can conjure up in our minds that just turns everyone off...

Because really...if these people were the bearers of good news...we would have let them in right away!

Who doesn’t want to hear good news?

If they had come up to the house on a regular basis and said, “Look kids...the ice cream truck is right outside!” we would have answered the door pronto post haste...that was great news...

Cause we are all wanting to hear something good....

If there’s a sale on some item that I just can’t do without – I want to know about it! Tell me...

If there’s a new restaurant that has fabulous food in town – don’t keep it to yourself – tell me! Cue me in...especially if they make a good crème brulee

If my Chihuahua has run away from home and found a new owner...that would be the best news of all. Please tell me all about that one.

You see, good news is what we are meant to share...what this church stuff is all about; its supposed to be something we are passionate about...and that we love to share...if nothing else...we are meant to do it in a way that reflects that what we stand for as Christians is actually a *good thing*– a very wonderful thing..not a bad thing or something we have to be ashamed about.

What’s the good news?

God loves you immeasurably more than you have any idea...

God has called you to be in relationship with him...

God is the kind of God who sacrificed himself on the cross in the person of Jesus Christ so you could be set free...get to know him, choose for him, grow in him...

God has a plan and purpose for your life...Good news...**Who keeps good news to themselves? Usually we want to share it!!**

Now...before Easter we did a whole series on the seven last words of Christ on the cross...*but the real last words of Christ* – the very last thing he said to the disciples before he left them didn’t happen on the cross – but it happened after he was resurrected and before he ascended back into heaven – the very last words of Christ to us were all about sharing our faith with others...not keeping it to ourselves

This was the very last thing Jesus told us to do (sometimes called the Great Commission)...**“Go into all the world and preach the gospel... and I am with you always to the close of the age.”** These are the last words of Christ spoken on this earth.

Go tell the good news Jesus is saying... Usually the last words you say to someone are the words you want them to remember. These are words that matter

These are words that count – pack a punch

So I don't think that any of us can get away with saying today "Well, I am a Christian, but I just don't talk about it."

Not when Jesus' last words to us were 'go and tell others" go and share...be my witnesses.

But how?

II. THE GOOD NEWS IS MEANT TO BE SHARED HUMBLY, SIMPLY AND WITH AUTHENTICITY

I think for many of us, it is hard to know how to share our faith in a positive way...

In a way that will encourage people, not make them run and go hide in the attic

To make matters worse the current climate in our culture goes something like this...and this comes from a pastor I know who sat in on a business class at Stanford taught by Bill Meehan who teaches a class on non-profit strategies. And in that class they were examining the strategies of Willow Creek which is a big mega church in Illinois and how they evangelize....

Evidently, there is never more animation in his class than around this topic of evangelism...and here's sort of a snippet of the dialogue that happens in that class among the students...

This is what they say, "**Here's my problem with you Christians, say the students in that class... It is okay for you to believe in Jesus, but you should not try to convert other people. It's manipulative. It's okay for you to believe in Jesus and have joy and peace and all that stuff, but you should not say, 'You need to believe this, too. This is right. This is true. You must believe.'** Because that's narrow, and that's arrogant and that's judgmental. You shouldn't try to convert people."

How many of you

have heard that argument before? Yeah.

So there is this external pressure and problem with evangelism that comes from our culture, and then you couple that with some internal struggles that we all have with evangelism like, **"I'm afraid. I feel inadequate, ill-equipped. I tried it before, and it doesn't work. It's intimidating. I'm not wired to talk to people. It's not really my job.** That's what I give the tithes and the offerings for, for people like preachers and missionaries to go do that stuff."
Right?

So let's back up a minute – I want to take the negativity and manipulative connotation out of this...

What do you hear in the Stanford students statement (lets put that on the screen again) that is a wrong assumption?

Well...the assumption is that when I share my faith...I am out to convert you

That I am out to change who you are...and that its up to me to make that happen and somehow I am going to manipulate you to that end...–

Did Jesus say go out and convert people? No...not ever. Maybe Willow Creek did...but Jesus never said that

Did Jesus say go out and tell people about the good news? Yes..its a command

There's a huge difference between converting people and telling them something good.

I prefer the latter...

We can't convert, nor should we try

No person can change a heart. It's impossible. **That's the Holy Spirit's job!**

What we say to others about Christ is one step in a process... That's why the internal struggle that we have that when I share my faith "it doesn't work"...or "I'm not good at this" is senseless

When we talk to someone about Jesus, we are not out for our own results For changing someone else...cause we can't do it...its arrogant to think we can

Our job, according to Jesus, is simply to go and tell...others ...about how good God is

As witnesses we– basically tell our story about what God has done in our lives.

There's no greater power than telling our own story – with authenticity and humility...

There's no one upmanship here...or pressure to make someone else change cause that's the Holy Spirit's department

There's no arrogance..., well *I know something you don't know so I am better than you posturing*...there just can't be that..

Because...

We're all broken, sinful, we've all had moments when life has beaten us down, we're not superior because we believe in Jesus Christ...we're just people who have found hope in this dark world, we're just people who know that when you pray great things happen, we're just people who've experienced grace upon grace...

We're just people who have thrown ourselves again and again on the mercy of God and found him faithful

That's good news isn't it? Its worth sharing in a hopeless world...

AA has this great definition of evangelism...its this

One beggar telling another beggar where the bread is

Don't you love that? Bread for a beggar is good news if I'm hungry.

But I'm a beggar too. I don't deserve the love of Jesus anymore than anyone else.

I've just found where the bread is, and I wanted you to know.

If you are hungry...here's a place to find some bread...come and eat

If you are thirsty...here's a place to find water...come and drink

If you are hopeless...here's a place, at the foot of the cross, to find a new start

It's that simple...it isn't complicated or hard..its simply being real to who we know God to be, and sharing it

After we share our story...after we are witnesses to what God has done in our lives...we put that person back in God's hands

We pray for that person, we do everything we can to love that person in tangible extravagant ways that they will understand

But we aren't loving them to manipulate them; we love them because we truly care for them because the love of Christ is alive in our hearts for them

And we trust that the seed that we planted with our words will take root at the right time and at the right place...by the power of the Holy Spirit...not by our own power.

But now you might say...I don't use *my words* to share my faith. I share my faith by my actions.

Well there's a lot to be said for that. And in today's environment, actions speak louder than words a lot of times.

But I think we need both...

If you are using your words to communicate at all...about other things... why wouldn't you use your words to communicate your faith too?

We talk about so many things that are so trivial...why not use words to share what's most important to you...that has eternal value? That may bring a glimmer of eternal hope to someone who is hurting...because God uses our words as well as our actions to open people's hearts to the Holy Spirit's power...

There is a study that came out from the **Institute of Church Growth**, and it's an interesting study.

It's a **survey of**

14,000 people, and these people were all asked... "**How did you come to Christ? How did you come to church?**"

And one to **two percent of people who came to Christ said that one day they just walked into church, thought it was kind of cool and decided to stay.** That's two percent...at most

What about the **effect of the pastor? Five percent. Five percent of people came to Christ because the pastor said something or did something like visiting them...and that made a difference.**

But...Guess where *the real change* happened? Guess what made the most difference?

You! The congregation's witness out in the world!

75-90 percent of people...I repeat...**75-90 percent of people came to Christ for the first time because they were invited by a friend or a relative to church.**

Someone – one of you out there one day had the guts to say to someone who knew nothing about God or had any faith, “Come with me to church this morning. Sit next to me. This is meaningful for me, and maybe you'll find

it meaningful too.”

How simple, and yet how important that witness is!

I should be paying you to be my congregation!!

Now I don't know how you invite someone to church without using your words.

It would be kind of hard I think...to invite them with your actions..

I suppose you could just kidnap them and force them into a car...not tell them where you are going... but it would be a little scary for them...

(IMAGE?)

Remember...Jesus tells us to share our faith with our words...it's the last thing he told us to do...so it must be pretty important to articulate what we believe

But it doesn't have to be complicated

Simpler is better...

Another very good way to open the door to share your faith with a person is if someone is sharing with you some difficulty, your witness could be as simple as saying, “If you would like, I can put you on the prayer chain at our church. I believe that God works through prayer. He certainly has in my life.”

Simple. Easy. To the point.

Most people totally appreciate that statement.

They may ask you...tell me more

Most people want to be prayed for...they'll take whatever they can get... whoever is up there...when times are tough...they are willing to go with it if it helps them out

III. Evangelism is a process...never give up on people!

Don't assume that just because someone doesn't seem to be responding to what you are telling them about the Lord, or doing to show them love

Don't assume that God is not at work in their heart...have confidence that God is at work...no matter how slow the process...

Tell story here of agnostic hanging out here at WVPC (Impact...staff person...no idea...Carol)

Look...I never thought this person would turn around, soften toward the gospel...become a Christian...never...YOU had an impact even though you didn't know.

I have had people who have prayed for others – one woman never gave up praying for a colleague of hers at work – she prayed for 35 years for this woman everyday until she came to Christ. 35 years!

I don't know why it sometimes takes so long.

I just know scripture tells us never to give up on people.

As we approach this table this morning, we remember again that God never gave up on us. His message to us is “I love you...I love you...I love you” and we just couldn't get it. Our rebellion against God was rampant, our sin and anger against one another constant.

God could have given up on you and me – on the world.

But he didn't stop telling us how much he loved us. In love and mercy he sent his own son to die for us...we beat him and rejected him...but he didn't give up.

While we yet sinners Christ died for us. This is a profound truth...Take out the orange card now and *On the orange card...on the back put the first name of someone you know and care about, who is not a Christian but someone that you would like to have meet Jesus.*

Maybe its someone you need to share your faith with – simply humbly authentically. If you haven't shared your faith with this person as you write that persons name ask God to give you an opportunity to do that.

Maybe its someone that you have shared your faith with already but that you just need to keep praying for and loving in ways that impact their life and make a difference... ask God to touch that person and help you never to give up on them...we will pray for all these names at Tuesday prayer...

Let's pray now together...

Lord God you taught us with your words about your love, and then you showed us on the cross that those words were true. This table reminds us of your great sacrifice, and your willingness to keep at it for us...Help us to be your witnesses and share our faith with words and with actions. Help us never to give up but for loves sake to persevere...for the world...for you so loved the world...Amen