

John Docherty, May 1, 2016

You are witnesses

Today's theme is “You are witnesses”, and the main text of interest is the passage from the Book of Acts, where Paul meets the women of Philippi at the river's edge. We're told that Paul comes to this part of the Aegean coast as the result of a vision in which he is implored to “... come over to Macedonia and help us ...”

This particular passage is fairly tame – it simply involves the message to come to Macedonia, followed by a brief mention of the trip there, and an equally brief description of the contact with the women by the waterside, and Lydia's conversion, baptism, and invitation to Paul and his entourage to stay with her at her home.

But although this passage is tame, it's sandwiched in between two fairly intense episodes in Paul's journeys, and I suppose it was chosen as one of the texts for a theme on evangelism / witnessing, because Lydia is the first “European” convert we hear of.

It's preceded by the prohibition to speak the Gospel in Asia, which isn't perhaps so much intense as it is curious – I'll come back to this later – and it's followed by a tumultuous episode in Philippi itself : Paul and Silas are followed around by a slave girl who declares to everyone that “... these men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.”

Now this girl is a soothsayer, and we're told that her owners made a lot of money from her fortune telling. Strangely enough we're also told that “Paul was annoyed, and turned and said to the spirit, 'I charge you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.' And it came out that very hour.”

The slave girl's owners are now the ones who are annoyed, since she is no longer able or willing to tell fortunes, and they drag Paul and Silas before the authorities, have them stripped, beaten and imprisoned.

Now, that particular passage is part of the readings suggested for next week, so I won't linger on it and possibly risk stealing some of Patricia's thunder – she's scheduled to speak next week – I won't deal with it other than to note that Paul's work of evangelism is fraught with risk of its own, and that his silencing of the slave girl seems to suggest to me that not all forms of proclamation are necessarily welcome or helpful.

But let's back up a bit and take a look at the preceding passage, where Paul and his group are forbidden from going into Asia to spread the gospel. Again, I won't particularly linger on that passage other than to note that *it* seems to suggest to me that

there is a time and a place for a certain kind of proclamation, and a time and a place to be more circumspect in one's approach.

But I'm preaching to Mennonites; neither Catholic nor Protestant; not quite hardcore fundamentalist evangelicals, but not quite anything-goes mainline nominal Christians either. We've always been balanced in our living out of our faith – haven't we? We've always striven to share the Good News in word *and* deed, haven't we? We've always known exactly how to go about sharing our faith in clear, unambiguous, and explicit ways, right?

Well, apparently not, if the most recent issue of the Canadian Mennonite is anything to go by.

The front cover, and the lead article, puts the question this way : “What's up with Mennos and mission?”

The article then explores various ways that we struggle with what it means to do mission;

the questions we ask ourselves;

the discomfort we have with certain styles;

the realization that “Without the ability to verbalize our faith and share God's love in all nations – including our own – the church and its message of shalom cannot thrive.”

I'd like to encourage everybody to take some time to read through this issue. I found it an interesting read, and I'd like to use this meditation to highlight a few quotes that stirred my own thinking around what it means to share my faith, and I'd like to invite you to use some of the sharing time to share some of your own thoughts around what it means to you to share your faith or live out your faith.

The first quote I'd like to highlight is from Willard Metzger, Executive Director of Mennonite Church Canada: “... The idea of speaking at an evangelism conference made me uncomfortable ... My first thought was that Mennonites don't do [evangelism] anymore, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized that we do. We just do it differently”

Some of you, I'm sure, have a better idea than I do of what Willard means by that. How do we do evangelism differently? I've tended to assume we are more focused on demonstrating our faith by our actions, and doing so in a way that invites people to ask us what motivates us - what drives us? Is that what he means?

The next quote is from Tim Froese, Mennonite Church Canada Executive Minister Of Missions : “If we are truly meeting God when we worship, and allowing God to transform us, how could we not be inspired to share that transformation with others?” While in principle I think I agree with him, the statement does raise a couple of questions for me.

First : are we truly meeting God when we worship? That may seem like an odd, almost sacrilegious question. Surely the whole point of worship is to meet God ... but ... it's a question I've often asked myself in the various churches I've attended, including here at MFM. It's not that I doubt that God is here with us, it's that I hope and pray that we're doing much more than putting on a performance on Sunday morning. We put a lot of effort into preparing an experience that we hope is meaningful, stimulating and respectful of the different ways that we experience God. I hope it meets that need in each of you.

The second question Froese's quote raises for me has to do with his point that we are allowing God to transform us, and that that would naturally lead to inspiring us to share that transformation with others. Do you feel that you are being transformed by God? And if you feel like you *are* being transformed, how much of that has to do with the community of faith that is MFM? How much of it has to do with how God is at work in other parts of your life?

The next quote comes from Jonathan Bonk, whose son Jim attended here at MFM for a while. I believe Jonathan Bonk has spoken at MFM on at least one occasion. He says this: “I think actually we realize ... God must be a more generous spirit than our theology has given him credit for. At a deep level – we're even unconscious of it – there's this subliminal agnosticism. We doubt. Otherwise, we're terrible people. Because we shouldn't be wasting time here, we should be rushing around screaming at people, “You're going to hell.” Deep, deep inside, we know that God is better than that and better than what our ancestors were able to construct.”

I like that sentiment very much. I'm not sure I would describe the reluctance to run around screaming that people are going to hell as subliminal agnosticism – I don't think it comes from a place of doubt about the veracity of our traditional theology so much as from a place of willingness to set that theology against what our heart is telling us about God's justice, love and mercy.

Is it possible that Jeremiah’s prophecy is being lived out in our time? :

“But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be

their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord', for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more."

I love his statement : "Deep, deep inside, we know that God is better than that and better than what our ancestors were able to construct."

The final quote I'd like to highlight comes from the Family Ties column by Melissa Miller. This particular column is focused on LGBT questions but she has an interesting insight that I think applies to evangelism and our call to be active workers with God. She says this: "By training, counsellors look for health, with an eye to determining what steps and behaviours lead to wholeness." Is this the mission of the church? To look for signs of health? To be attentive to where God is at work - healing, sustaining - and building on that?

Are we called to recognize in those around us the kinds of qualities that are reflective of the heart of God, to acknowledge those strengths and values and draw people into a fuller expression of this way of life? Is our commission to go out to all the nations and make disciples a commission to help those around us embrace what their heart is already telling them to do on some level?

Are we called to be witnesses, not only of what God has done in our lives, but witnesses of how God is already at work in the lives of those around us?