

## I Love To Tell the Story

Scriptures:

Isaiah 61:1-3; 61:10-62:

Romans 10:9-171

Mark 5:1-20

First Presbyterian Church

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The Praise Team has just sung an arrangement of “I Love to Tell the Story,” one of my favorite hymns and at the end of the service, we’re all going to sing it. So, in the next few minutes, I’d like for us to look a little more closely at the words that we will be singing.

In the first verse we sing: “I love to tell the story of unseen things above, of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love. I love to tell the story, because I know ‘tis true; it satisfies my longings as nothing else could do.”

In the selection I just read from Mark, after casting out the demons that had been afflicting Legion for years, Legion asked to go with Jesus. It’s clear that the people were uneasy with what Jesus had just done and I suspect that Legion knew that because of his history, people would continue to be uncomfortable with him. But Jesus responded to the request by telling Legion, no, what He wanted him to do was to return to his home and share with all the people the good news of what Jesus had done for him. Isn’t this what we are called to do, to share the good news of Jesus and His Glory, of Jesus and His love? And aren’t we likely to be most effective if we approach that task with the attitude suggested in this first verse?

In the second verse, when we sing: “I love to tell the story; more wonderful it seems than all the golden fancies of all our golden dreams; I Love to tell the story; it did so much for me. And that is just the reason I tell it now to thee,” we are acknowledging the wondrous nature of God’s love for us and recognizing that the impact it has on our lives should motivate us to share the Good News with others.

Then in the third verse we sing: “I love to tell the story; ‘tis pleasant to repeat; what seems, each time I tell it, more wonderfully sweet. I love to tell the story, for some have never heard the message of salvation from God’s own holy Word.”

In the NIV of the passage from Romans that Kathy read we are reminded that “faith comes from hearing the message and the message is heard through the word of Christ.” But the passage also asks “How, then can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?” Or as the verse emphasizes, “I love to tell the story, for some have never heard the message of salvation from God’s own holy Word.”

In the fourth verse we are reminded that this is a story that never gets old and that we are called to share the good news both with nonbelievers and with our fellow

Christians, or, as the verse says, “I love to tell the story; for those who know it best seem hungering and thirsting to hear it like the rest.”

In many ways, the words to this hymn pretty well sum up a portion of our faith. It talks about something that many of us struggle with as Christians; our call to evangelism, to share the good news of Jesus and His love with all those we encounter in our lives.

The first story I want to share with you this morning, describes how a Christian woman named Edith Burns made it part of her life to share the good news with everyone she came in contact with.

### **Do You Believe in Easter?**

Edith Burns was a wonderful Christian who lived in San Antonio, Texas. She was the patient of a doctor by the name of Will Phillips. One morning he went to his office with a heavy heart and it was because of Edith. When he walked into the waiting room, there sat Edith with her big black Bible in her lap earnestly talking to a young mother sitting beside her.

Edith had a habit of introducing herself in this way: “Hello, my name is Edith Burns. Do you believe in Easter?” Then she would explain the meaning of Easter, and many times people would be saved.

After being called into the doctor’s office, Edith sat down and when she took a look at the doctor she said, “Dr. Will, why are you so sad?” With a heavy heart Dr. Phillips said, “Your lab report came back and it says you have cancer, and Edith, you’re not going to live very long.” Edith said, “Why Will Phillips, shame on you. Why are you so sad? You have just told me I’m going to see my precious Lord Jesus, my husband, and my friends. You have just told me that I am going to celebrate Easter forever, and here you are having difficulty giving me my ticket!”

Several months later Edith did not show up for her scheduled appointment. Later that day, Edith called Dr. Phillips and said she would have to be moving her story to the hospital and she asked, “Will, I’m very near home, so would you make sure that they put women next to me in my room who need to know about Easter?” Well, they did just that and as women began to come in and share that room with Edith many came to know Jesus.

Everybody on that floor from staff to patients was excited about Edith. They all started calling her Edith Easter; that is everyone except Phyllis Cross, the head nurse. Phyllis made it plain that she wanted nothing to do with Edith because she was a “religious nut.” One morning the two nurses who usually attended to Edith were sick. Edith had the flu and Phyllis had to go in and give her a shot. When she walked in, Edith had a big smile on her face and

said, "Phyllis, God loves you and I love you, and I have been praying for you." Phyllis said, "Well, you can quit praying for me, it won't work. I'm not interested." Edith said, "Well, I will pray and I have asked God not to let me go home until you come into the family." Phyllis said, "Then you will never die because that will never happen," and curtly walked out of the room.

One day Phyllis was literally drawn to Edith's room. She sat down on the bed and Edith said, "I'm so glad you have come, because God told me that today is your special day." Phyllis said, "Edith, you have asked everybody here the question, 'Do you believe in Easter?' but you have never asked me." Edith said, "Phyllis, I wanted to many times, but God told me to wait until you asked, and now that you have asked..." Edith took her Bible and shared with Phyllis the Easter Story of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Edith said, "Phyllis, do you believe in Easter? Do you believe that Jesus Christ is alive and that He wants to live in your heart?" Phyllis said, "Oh I want to believe that with all of my heart, and I do want Jesus in my life." Right there, Phyllis prayed and invited Jesus Christ into her heart.

Two days later, Phyllis came in and Edith said, "Do you know what day it is?" Phyllis said, "Why Edith, its Good Friday." Edith said, "Oh, no, for you every day is Easter. Happy Easter, Phyllis!" Two days later, on Easter Sunday, Phyllis came into work, did some of her duties and then went down to the flower shop and got some Easter lilies because she wanted to go up to see Edith and give her some Easter lilies and wish her a Happy Easter. When she walked into Edith's room, Edith was in bed. That big black Bible was on her lap and there was a sweet smile on her face. When Phyllis went to pick up Edith's hand, she realized Edith was dead. Phyllis took one look at that dead body, and then lifted her face toward heaven, and with tears streaming down her cheeks, said, "Happy Easter, Edith - Happy Easter!"

Phyllis left Edith's body, walked out of the room, and over to a table where two student nurses were sitting. She said, "My name is Phyllis Cross. Do you believe in Easter?"

This is an approach to evangelism that many of us find difficult but it's also clear that when done correctly it can be very effective. I'm not going to tell you that it's the only way or even the best way for each of us to share the good news because I recognize that for me, I wouldn't be very effective if I forced myself to follow this example.

However, that doesn't mean any of us are off the hook. We still clearly are called to share the good news. Sometimes that is best done by personal example as we live our lives. During my 28 years working at the Forestry Sciences Laboratory I never made it a secret what my faith meant to me and that I was there to help folks when needs arose. I observed others who tried to more directly impose their faith on folks

and discovered that it appeared that they frequently were not very effective. In fact, I would say that at times they probably had the reverse effect from what they hoped for.

The following story shows how the way we live our lives on a daily basis can affect those we come in contact with.

### **Red Marbles**

During the waning years of the depression in a small southeastern Idaho community, I used to stop by Mr. Miller's roadside stand for farm-fresh produce as the season made it available. Food and money were still extremely scarce and bartering was used extensively. One particular day Mr. Miller was bagging some early potatoes for me. I noticed a small boy, ragged but clean, hungrily apprising a basket of freshly picked green peas. I paid for my potatoes but was also drawn to the display of fresh peas. Pondering the peas, I couldn't help overhearing the conversation between Mr. Miller and the ragged boy next to me. "Hello Barry, how are you today?" "H'lo, Mr. Miller. Fine, thank ya. Jus' admirin' them peas ... sure look good." "They are good, Barry. How's your Ma?" "Fine. Gittin' stronger alla' time." "Good. Anything I can help you with?" "No, Sir. Jus' admirin' them peas." "Would you like to take some home?" "No, Sir. Got nuthin' to pay for 'em with." "Well, what have you got to trade me for some of those peas?" "All I got's my prize marble here." "Is that right? Let me see it." "Here 'tis. She's a dandy." "I can see that. Hmmmm, only thing is this one is blue and I sort of go for red. Do you have a red one like this at home?" "Not 'zackley .....but, almost." "Tell you what. Take this sack of peas home with you and next trip this way let me look at that red marble." "Sure will. Thanks, Mr. Miller." Mrs. Miller, who had been standing nearby, came over to help me. With a smile she said: "There are two other boys like him in our community, all three are in very poor circumstances. Jim just loves to bargain with them for peas, apples, tomatoes or whatever. When they come back with their red marbles, and they always do, he decides he doesn't like red after all and he sends them home with a bag of produce for a green marble or an orange one." I left the stand, smiling to myself, impressed with this man. A short time later I moved to Utah but I never forgot the story of this man, the boys, and their bartering.

Several years went by and I had occasion to visit some old friends in that Idaho community and while I was there learned that Mr. Miller had just died. They were having his viewing that evening and knowing my friends wanted to go, I agreed to accompany them. Upon our arrival at the mortuary we fell into line to meet the relatives of the deceased and to offer whatever words of comfort we could. Ahead of us in line were three young men. One was in an army uniform and the other two wore nice haircuts, dark suits and white shirts. They approached Mrs. Miller standing by her husband's casket. Each

of the young men hugged her, kissed her on the cheek, spoke briefly with her and moved on to the casket. Her misty light blue eyes followed them as, one by one, each young man stopped briefly and placed his own warm hand over the cold pale hand in the casket. Each left the mortuary, awkwardly, wiping his eyes. Our turn came to meet Mrs. Miller. I told her who I was and mentioned the story she had told me about the marbles. Eyes glistening she took my hand and led me to the casket. "Those three young men that just left were the boys I told you about. They just told me how they appreciated the things Jim "traded" them. Now, at last, when Jim could not change his mind about color or size, they came to pay their debt. "We've never had a great deal of the wealth of this world," she confided, "but, right now, Jim would consider himself the richest man in Idaho." With loving gentleness she lifted the lifeless fingers of her deceased husband. Resting underneath were three magnificently shiny, red marbles.

I'd like to share a couple of personal experiences which have verified to me that the way we live our lives can have an impact on those we encounter. Many of you have heard me talk about the family reunions I try to attend each year around the fourth of July at the farm my father grew up on in central Wisconsin. Each year 60 – 75 members of our extended family and local folks gather for an afternoon of food and fellowship. A number of years ago, those planning the reunion asked me if I would be willing to offer grace for the meal. I took that as an opportunity to include in prayer any joys or concerns that I was aware of and to also include some time for silent personal prayer. As the years have progressed and those of my father's generation have gotten older and some have passed away and as members of succeeding generations have also grown and reached significant times in their lives such as marriage and birth of children, this has become a more important time in our reunions.

I've had the chance to share my faith with many of these same people during the funeral services for both of my parents. Since the local pastor in Wisconsin really didn't know either of my parents, I had the privilege of sharing some thoughts and remembrances about each of them during the services. The response was interesting. During the service I could tell that my sisters appreciated my efforts but following the services, relatives and local people, many of whom I really didn't know that well talked with me about how much they appreciated my participation in the service. Over the years I've also been invited to offer prayer at some local community events when I was home for the reunion. Now this is likely partly due to the fact that they realized they had found someone willing to pray in public. But I think partly it had also become clear that it was ok and even important to include prayer in activities. I remember a dedication of a plaque documenting the historic rural school house that my father attended as a child. One of the neighbors had asked me to offer grace for the meal that was to precede the dedication and to also include something about the dedication. Well, it turned out that the way things were organized folks were eating before there was any convenient opportunity for prayer. I figured that I was off the hook but following lunch as the dedication portion of the program was beginning, the

neighbor who had asked for my help indicated she would still like prayer included. So I prayed for the food we had just eaten and for the dedication about to take place and the significance it had for so many of those in attendance. Again a number of folks spoke with me after the dedication and expressed their appreciation for my contribution.

I want to share a bit more about one of the individuals who has spoken with me following each of the events I've just described, a distant relative named John. I only this summer finally figured out what our relationship was. In recent years he and his family have become regular attendees at the summer reunions and our relationship has grown to the point that each time I see him, he urges me to seriously consider moving back to central Wisconsin. This summer I saw John at church on the Sunday morning following the reunion. I've seen him in church for funerals but never on a Sunday morning before. I'm not trying to take credit for John being in church but I think it's clear that it can never hurt to demonstrate to folks that it's ok to "publicly" be a Christian.

In none of these cases did I do what I did for any reason other than I thought it was what I needed to do in the particular situation. But in each case I may have had an impact beyond what I intended. And you know, that's frequently the case.

The point is that often our actions speak just as loudly as any words we could share. However we each need to remember that we are called to share the good news of Jesus and His love with those we encounter both through our actions and through our words. As Christians we should approach this calling as the song suggests: "I love to tell the story of unseen things above, of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love. I love to tell the story, because I know 'tis true; it satisfies my longings as nothing else could do."

I want to close with the following prayer written by Mother Teresa of Calcutta:

Dear Jesus,

Help us to spread your fragrance everywhere we go. Flood our souls with your spirit and life. Penetrate and possess our whole being so utterly that our lives may only be a radiance of yours... Let us thus praise you in the way you love best by shining on those around us. Let us preach you without preaching, not by words, but by our example, by the catching force, the sympathetic influence of what we do, the evident fullness of the love our hearts bear to you. Amen.