

## Gospel Chatter

Isaiah 52:7-10; John 4:28-30, 39-42

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One of the things that I enjoyed most about my summer was being able to go to worship at other churches, to sit in the pew, to sing the hymns and listen to the scriptures and sermons and to be led in prayer.

But there was always something about my Sunday mornings that sat uneasily with me. Every Sunday as we were on our way to church, no matter where we were, we would pass by all sorts of people for whom church/worship appeared to have no place in their day. We would see groups of cyclists in their bright colored bike outfits out for their Sunday ride; there were couples pushing baby strollers; there were people mowing the lawn.

Now maybe I was reading these people wrong, and they had gone to church on Saturday night or they would be going later in the day. But I came to the conclusion that there are a lot of people out there for whom going to church is at best an optional activity and at worst something to be avoided.

Which made me then start thinking about the people who were in church. Why were they there? Why did they come to church that day? Now I know there are all sorts of good and bad reasons that people come to church, but I think the reason many people come to church is because they hear something in church that they don't hear any place else. In a world where there is so much bad news, in church you hear good news. In a world that seems to say that it's all up to you, in church you are reminded that your life is in the hands of a good and loving God. In a world where there is so much conflict and disagreement and meanness, in church you hear phrases like, "Love one another." In church you hear things that you don't hear any place else.

So, do those people out riding their bikes or mowing their lawns on Sunday not need to hear a word of good news? Are there no stresses in their lives that would be lightened by knowing that God is with them? How do we reach out to these people with the good news of God's love, with the joy of Jesus?

That's the question for today: Evangelism Sunday. Evangelism Sunday is about sharing the good news. So, with that in mind, let's turn to this morning's scripture. This comes at the end of a story that is pretty familiar to most of us. We know it as the story of the woman at the well. Jesus was traveling through Samaria when about noontime he stopped at a well to get a drink. It happened that there was a Samaritan woman drawing water from the well, and Jesus asked her for a drink of water.

Now just from these few sketchy details, we know that the encounter between Jesus and this woman is going in a surprising direction. First, since it was not considered proper for a man to speak to a woman in public, it was a surprise that Jesus would speak to this woman at all. Add to that the fact that the woman was a Samaritan and Jesus was a Jew, and Jews would never even consider drinking from the same cup as a Samaritan. There was longstanding bad blood between Jews and Samaritans.

But that's not all that we know about this woman. We are told that it was about noontime when she was drawing water. The normal time that women would come to the

well was first thing in the morning, so the fact that this woman was there at noon suggests that she probably didn't want to run the risk of having a brush with the other women of the village.

As the conversation between Jesus and this woman goes on, you learn why. This currently unmarried woman has had five husbands, and my guess is that the proper ladies of the village didn't have anything good to say about her—just malicious gossip. So it was easier on this woman just to avoid contact with the others completely.

There must have been something about the conversation with Jesus that touched this woman deeply. Maybe for the first time she was hearing a word of good news rather than a word of judgment.

Any way, eventually the conversation between Jesus and this woman draws to a close and the woman goes back to her village. That's where our scripture picks up:

John 4:28-30, 39-42

It sounds like when this woman got back to the village, she just couldn't stop talking—to anyone she passed on the street, “Come and see the man who told me everything I've ever done; he can't be the messiah, can he?”

Now that's not the most persuasive evangelistic message I've ever heard. But it must have been enough to get the villagers to seek out Jesus and to meet him for themselves. The scripture says, “Many Samaritans from that village believed in him because of the woman's testimony.”

This woman's testimony. Testimony. That sounds like the woman had a nice, clearly-thought out statement which she would stand and deliver. But that's not quite the way it was. In fact the word that is translated “testimony” (in v. 28) is the Greek word *lalia*. That's the word that is often used to describe the babbling chatter that little babies make. *Lalialialia*. It was because of this woman's babbling chatter that the people of the village met Jesus.

They said to her, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”

That wonderful affirmation that these people could make about Jesus came about because of some woman's babbling chatter about Jesus.

So let's go back to those people out riding their bikes or pushing their baby strollers on Sunday mornings. What do we have to do to reach out to them with the gospel? Well, maybe all that's needed from us is a little babbling chatter. I think some of us think that we can't share the faith with another person because “I might make a mistake or I can't really put into words exactly what I believe.” All this woman did was chatter, and that was enough. The Holy Spirit can take even our babbling chatter and use it to proclaim good news.

Evangelists are not people who can give you a well-reasoned, thoroughly thought out testimony. They are people who are willing in their own halting way to tell other people how they have experienced Jesus in their lives.

One book I read this summer...and which you'll probably get tired of hearing me talk about, because it's likely to work its way in to a lot of sermons in the weeks to come...is *Unbroken* by Laura Hillenbrand.

It's the amazing true story of a man named Louie Zamperini. Louie Zamperini first became known as a long distance runner, competing in the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin—the games where Hitler was in the audience. Louie Zamperini had a promising career as a runner when the war broke out, and he was drafted. He became a bombardier on a B-24, known by some people as a “Flying Coffin.” He was assigned to the Pacific, and flew a number of bombing missions over the Japanese controlled islands. On one occasion when his crew was sent out on a search and rescue mission, his plane crashed. Louie Zamperini and two others were the only survivors of the crash. They spent the next 47 days in an inflatable rubber raft, enduring hardship and hunger and thirst that is beyond anything we can imagine.

Finally they came ashore on an island, and that's where things really got bad. He was captured and taken to a Japanese prison camp where for the next few years he was subjected to the cruelest and most inhumane treatment that one person could do to another. The harshest of his captors was a man that was given the ironic nickname of “The Bird.” The Bird seemed to single out Louie for the worst of his tortures and meanness. That anyone could survive such an ordeal is unbelievable.

But eventually the war did end, and the POWs were allowed to go home. Louie Zamperini went back to his home in California and tried to resume a normal life. He married and tried to make a life for his wife and himself, but the terrible memories of what he had endured in the prison camps haunted him. He suffered from what we now call PTSD—post traumatic stress disorder. He couldn't sleep. In his dreams he would see The Bird standing over him, getting ready to beat him yet again. He was awakened from one of those nightmares when he heard screaming, only to discover that the screaming was coming from his wife whom he was choking, thinking that she was “The Bird.” He began drinking heavily, and his life was rapidly spiraling down into a dark sinkhole. Louie Zamperini came to the conclusion that the only thing he could do was to seek out “The Bird” and kill him. He was consumed by the desire for revenge on his cruel captor.

In the fall of 1949 a young evangelist named Billy Graham came to Los Angeles. This was not one of those football stadium crusades; these were the early days when they set up a tent and a few hundred people came to listen. Louie knew nothing and cared nothing of Billy Graham, but at the invitation of a friend, Louie's wife Cynthia went to one of the crusade services. She invited Louie to go with her the next night, but he adamantly refused, so she went again by herself. The next day she asked Louie again if he would go, saying that Billy Gram's sermons often discussed religion and science. Louie had always been interested in science. Eventually, after refusing over and over again, Louie agreed to go with Cynthia. He sat sullenly on the back row. The sermon that night was about how God knows us through and through. Louie stayed through the sermon, but when Billy Graham gave the invitation to come forward, Louis left.

But the next night he went back again. This time when Billy Graham gave the invitation and Louis started making his way toward the exit, Billy Graham said, “There's somebody here tonight who's drowning.” Here was Louie who had almost literally drowned in the Pacific, and was now drowning in alcohol, in hate, in self-loathing, feeling a complete failure. Something made him stop, turn around and go forward

That was the beginning of the new life that God gave to Louie Zamperini. Over time, he felt that he still needed to seek out The Bird, not to kill him, but rather to say to him that he forgave him.

Ok, here's why I think this is a story for Evangelism Sunday.

As I read this story, I think there are two evangelists that were used by the Holy Spirit to give Louie Zamperini his new life. One was Billy Graham. But I think the real hero of this story was Louie's wife Cynthia, who stuck with him through the darkest times, and who simply invited her husband, whom she loved, to go with her to hear this man. Hers wasn't a well-reasoned, thoroughly thought out testimony, just some gospel chatter, "Come with me." And that was enough to make this broken man whole.

Here's what I'd like for you to think about as you leave here today. Think about times in your life when you have heard a word of good news, times when you have felt the Holy Spirit at work in your life, times when you have experienced the forgiveness of Jesus. It doesn't have to be a well thought out testimony, just a story in your own words of what Jesus has done for you, just some gospel chatter.

Then find someone you love and tell them that story. Maybe your story, your gospel chatter, your invitation will be just the thing that the person needs to hear. I believe that the Holy Spirit can use your words to touch someone's life.

Thank you, God, for your love, your forgiveness, and the new life you give.  
Amen. †