

The Walk: Share
Matthew 5:14-16

Rev. Dr. Nancy S. Lynn
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A few years ago, our Kenya Mission Team became aware of a need the students at Bishop Lawi Imathiu Secondary School, the school our church funded and helped to build, were struggling with. Oftentimes, by the time the students had walked, sometimes several miles, home from school, it was dark outside. Without electricity, they didn't have any light to do their homework.

Some of our FUMC folks learned of this challenge and came up with a solution. After gathering funds from the congregation, they were able to purchase solar-powered lanterns for the students. Overall, our church provided 828 lanterns, which had an immediate impact on the lives of these young students. Soon, little lights could be seen shining from family huts throughout the area. The lanterns flashing lights had the added benefit of scaring off the elephants as the students walked to and from school. It was a time when this church shared our faith literally by letting our light shine!

Today is the last day of our sermon series based on Adam Hamilton's book, *The Walk: Five Practices of the Christian Life*. When we become members, we promise to support the church with our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness. The idea of witness, or what Hamilton calls "sharing our faith", is a difficult one for many of us who grew up with televangelists and street corner prophets handing out tracts about salvation. Unfortunately, we have come to associate talking about our faith with fearmongering and condemnation. And we're not alone. Many people these days are suspicious of or doubtful about organized religion - especially in an academic community like Ann Arbor. As Christ-followers, we may not feel comfortable, or even safe, talking about our religious beliefs or church life outside of these four walls.

Yet, sharing his teachings is one of only two things Jesus directly commands us to do. In Matthew 28, when Jesus appears to the disciples after his crucifixion, Jesus tells them to go out into the world to share his teachings and baptize in his name. The second, by the way, is to celebrate Communion in his memory. United Methodism has only these two sacraments - baptism and Communion - because these are the specific commands Jesus gave us. Sadly, throughout history, much harm has been done by the Christian Church under the guise of baptizing in Jesus' name. Baptism became a tool of colonization as people were forced into conversion. In contrast, when we are faithful to what Jesus actually taught - basic tenets like love your neighbor, feed the hungry, take care of widows and orphans - then "witnessing" to our faith should lead to doing a lot of good in the world.

Like all of these spiritual practices, sharing our faith leads us to grow in faith. Hamilton writes, "As we talk about our faith, our experiences of God's love, of Christ's presence in our lives, of being a part of a church, or the impact our faith has on our lives, we find our faith in Christ actually deepens and becomes more real to us." It's like what any teacher can tell you, we learn a subject most thoroughly and truly make it our own when we are responsible for teaching it to someone else.

Like the other practices we've talked about over the last few weeks, sharing our faith is something we do both individually and collectively. As an individual, I am the first to admit that I am not comfortable with what you might call traditional evangelism. I can't imagine myself knocking on doors to tell people about Jesus or sitting in a cafe looking for people who might be waiting for me to testify to them. But, give me an opportunity to talk about this church, and I can't shut up! I can talk endlessly about the amazing people, the creative kids and youth programming, the awesome choir, the ministries to people who are unhoused or food insecure, the ongoing efforts to make meaningful contributions toward social justice, the commitment of the leadership...and on and on. Talking about what happens here is my way of talking about my faith. Perhaps it could be for you, as well.

An easy way to do that, to witness to others about the good that this church can do, is by leaving a Google review. Tell people what you love about our church. Share some of the good we do. Even better, make a point of inviting a friend or colleague to church with you. Let them see for themselves. Research consistently shows that more people start coming to a church because someone invited them than for any other reason.

Another way to share your faith is by talking openly with your children and grandchildren or other family members and friends about it. Hamilton makes the point that all of us came to faith because of someone else who nurtured us. Who was that for you? Your parent or grandparent? A teacher? A pastor? A friend? Someone told you enough about Jesus or about church to make you want to learn more. Who are the people in your life that you might inspire or encourage with your faith story?

Finally, we are witnesses to our faith in how we choose to live. St. Francis once famously said, "preach the gospel at all times; if necessary, use words". We communicate so much more about Jesus to other people when we live according to his teachings. Hamilton says, "None of us are perfect in how we live out our faith. But we are called by Jesus to live and share our faith in such a way that others see him in us." In our scripture reading, Jesus talks about each of us as a light that the world needs to see shining. How and where will you shine your light?

Those are some thoughts about how we can keep our vow to support the church through our witness individually. What about what we do as a congregation? Clearly, our efforts to meet the needs of others in our community and world is a witness to our belief in Jesus' teachings. Both the Kenya mission and Love Thy Neighbor grew out of recognizing an unmet need. Whether it is providing lights to students in Kenya or food to people living on the streets right here in Ann Arbor, when we actively listen to our community and seek to meet its needs, then we are witnesses to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

There is a wonderful image for this that I learned about in my doctoral program and Hamilton also cites. It comes from Ron Heifetz of the Harvard Kennedy School. You can find it in your bulletin where you see the forty-five-degree angle. One arm of the angle is a flat horizontal arrow that represents the world as it is today. The other arm, set at 45 degrees, represents the world as it should be. Hamilton argues that, "Each church is meant to look at its community and ask, "What would our community look like if, as we regularly pray, God's kingdom comes, and God's will is done in (Washtenaw County) as it is in heaven?" What would our community look like if it looked like the community Jesus hoped for? And where does our

community fall short?” The gap between what our community is and what it should be is where we, the church, are called to step in.

As we continue on our journey toward redeveloping our church property in partnership with the Wesley Foundation, a question to keep in the forefront of our minds is, how can we close the gap between how the world is and what it should be as we consider changes to our property. But, I don't want us to wait until we've completed that project! My vision for our church continues to be that we are deeply involved in the life of our community - that we know what needs there are and look for how we can draw from our faith and our resources to meet them. As with the other spiritual practices Hamilton writes about, he challenges us to make an individual commitment around sharing our faith, as well. He makes two suggestions. One is that we commit to posting something faith or church-related on social media. For example, it could be as simple as “We had a great time at our church's Trunk or Treat event.” The other is that we make a commitment to invite five people to church in the course of the year.

Jesus, who is our example for all of these spiritual practices, was particularly concerned with reaching out to those on the margins, those with either physical or spiritual needs or both, and those who were distanced from God. Hamilton shares that today, what makes people like these take notice of a church is “when that church and its members genuinely care about them and when they are actively engaged in seeking to have a positive impact on their community. They notice when a church serves others selflessly, when it gives generously, when it loves radically.”

Perhaps that is the thought with which to end this sermon series. Our church is the place where we participate in the practices that lead us to serve selflessly, give generously, and love radically. Ironically, those practices not only deepen our faith but support the church. Next week in worship, we will celebrate Thanksgiving together and dedicate our pledges to the church for the coming year. When we do, I've encouraged you to make commitments to yourself and to God for how you will nurture and nourish your own spiritual life. Spend some time this week prayerfully considering your giving to the church, this special community that worships, learns and serves together, but also consider what you will choose to do for your own faith formation. Two weeks from today is the first weekend in Advent and the beginning of a new year in the church's calendar. What will your new year's resolutions be?

May it be so. Amen.