

“Storytellers”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Today, we’re going to talk about that dreaded, fearsome, abused word: evangelism.

Chris Walker tells the story of four friends who board a New York City subway train. It’s their first time in the City. They’re on vacation. They’re coming from a small town in the Midwest. All they know about New York City is what they’ve gleaned from *Law and Order* reruns, the *Godfather*, and *West Side Story*. I don’t know if they expected gangs suddenly to break into song and dance, but they sure were afraid of getting mugged, murdered... I don’t know... cut into little pieces and mailed around the city.

This one Saturday morning, they’re in a subway car, going to a museum. There are only about half a dozen other people in the car. Just as the train begins to creak into gear, six tall, rough looking men leap through the closing doors into the car. Seeing them, Chris’s friends tense and pull their bags close to their bodies.

Now the train’s moving, our four tourists are huddled in the corner, when suddenly one of the men looks them square in the eye and shouts, “Have you ever thought about what happens when you DIE?” Our tourists are now convinced that they are about to be murdered by some psychos on a train. But then something odd happens. The man says, “If you were to die today and stand before the gates of heaven and you were asked, ‘Why should I let you in?’... are you prepared to answer? Are you prepared to step into eternity now?”

That’s right; these weren’t psychopathic killers at all; they were evangelists. A common mistake.

Of course at this point our four tourists just want to get off the train. No one could care less about what this guy has to say. Seeing this, he condemns the whole carload of passengers to hell, and then—get this—passes a hat for an offering.

Somehow, I don’t think this is what Jesus had in mind when he told the disciples to be his witnesses. Of course, I’m not sure if even the disciples knew what Jesus had in mind. After all, instead of hitting the streets with the good news, our disciples huddle in an upper room, praying and waiting—maybe trying to figure out what exactly they’re supposed to do, supposed to say.

The disciples have ministered with Jesus for three years. They’ve seen him drive out demons, cure the sick, give sight to the blind, go toe to toe with religious and state authorities, even bring the dead back to life. And now they’ve just spent 40 days with a dead man who rose up out of that grave, resurrected. For 40 days, the Son of God has talked with them about the kingdom of God. For 40 days, they’ve waited.

And now, the disciples think this is it! This is the moment when Jesus will complete his life’s work, will usher in the kingdom he’s been talking about for so long. This is the moment they’ve

been waiting for. They ask him, “Will you bring the kingdom now?” Jesus takes them by the shoulder and says, “No, but you will” [cf. Winnie Vargehese].

Jesus asks them to be his witnesses. Shocked, maybe disappointed, the disciples pull back, not wanting this responsibility.

In the Hebrew tradition, being a witness is no small matter. It means you are “in a unique position to tell the truth in some deeply important matter” (Beverly Gaventa). It is a sacred position, with strict obligations and restrictions.

Moreover, it means risk. The word *witness* is a translation of the Greek word meaning *martyr*. We all know what it meant in the early church to be a martyr. To lay it all down, even one’s own life, for the gospel.

That’s a gift I don’t know if I’d want. I suspect all of us have walked away from it at some point in our lives. Maybe you’re walking away from it right now. It’s one thing to devote an hour or two on a Sunday morning in the safety and comfort of church. It’s a whole other thing to witness to Christ in our daily living and our daily speaking. It’s a hard thing to live in such a way that every moment witnesses to the love of Christ. It’s a hard thing to move beyond the jargon and the traditions that mean little to outsiders and tell them—simply and personally—the story of how we came to walk with Christ.

In fact, it’d be an impossible thing if it weren’t for another gift promised in our text. Jesus tells the disciples that when he departs, God will come into them. The Holy Spirit will inspire them, will give them the power to live and speak as witnesses.

That’s why the disciples huddle in that upper room after Jesus’ ascension. Pentecost hasn’t happened yet. The Holy Spirit hasn’t entered them. So they wait. They pray and reflect. They gather as a community, men and women, old and young, wealthy and poor. And once the Spirit does come into them, they preach. They heal. They stand in solidarity with the poor and dispossessed. They share their possessions in common. They establish new communities. They tell a story.

A story of a God whose heart ached so much for us that God became one of us, suffered with us, stood up for the hurting and the oppressed, showed us a different way to live, to love, and then conquered death for us, conquered everything that separates the divine and the human, till there is only God, only love, only Christ resurrected.

To be a witness is to tell this story. Not just as it is written in the Bible, but also as we have experienced it.

To be a witness is to be a storyteller. So let me tell you a story.

It comes from my friend John Nasir. John is from Pakistan. He grew up Muslim, but his faith had floundered. And so one day, John wandered into a church. Just a little, one-room church. A man was sweeping the floor. His clothing was poor. John went up to the janitor and asked where he

might find the pastor. The man laid his broom against a chair, looked up at John, and said, “You’ve found him.” John was stunned at this humble man. They talked, for hours, for days. They wrestled together with Scripture. The pastor told him about a man who had rejected power and sided with the vulnerable, even to the point of death.

John was baptized. He became a Christian. Unfortunately this was also the time when Pakistan was coming under the influence of some fringe elements. While John still held love and respect in his heart for his fellow Muslims, and while many did for him also, some Muslims targeted him for his conversion. They stormed his house, threatened his mother, killed his friend who also had converted.

He fled Pakistan. He came to the United States seeking refuge. Instead he was tossed into a detention center. There he was subjected to crowded, violent, and inhumane living conditions. He described his experience there as torture. I suppose you could say the United States had also come under the influence of some fringe elements.

A team of Presbyterians visited John in that detention center. They petitioned for his release, which eventually, after years of effort, was secured in the form of a kind of parole. These Presbyterians opened their homes to John. He slept on their beds, ate at their tables. I became his friend. He was, and is, a gentle, kind man.

He was, and is, a man with a story. The story of a lost young man stumbling into a church and meeting Christ in a man in tattered clothes sweeping the floor, who wanted nothing but to listen and love him. The story of Christ visiting him in a detention center, freeing him from fear, and inviting John into his home.

John lived this story—in every act of kindness, in every stance of justice. John spoke this story. Not in doctrine or theological jargon. Not in canned, corny speeches. But in the simple, authentic account of his life. A story only he—in all the world—could tell.

What is your story? What have you seen, and experienced, and learned of God?

Your story may be more powerful than you realize. It is a record of God. And remember that with a word God created the world. With a true word, a true story, just imagine what you could do. **Amen.**