

SHARING FAITH

1 Peter 3:14b-16a, Acts 17:22-31

Two things, first of all, by way of celebrating Mother's Day. Mother's Day isn't a church celebration, but that doesn't mean we don't celebrate mothers in church. Who knows where mothers (and fathers) come from better than the people who call God Father (and sometimes Mother)?

Two reporters once asked some children, What is a mother, and here are some of the responses they got:

- + A mother is the only one, if she sings your favorite song, it stops thundering. (That's what Louise said.)
- + Laura said: Mothers are wonderful! She spends all her time on you. A mother is just like God, except God is better.
- + Fred got it right, too: It is lucky that we have a mother because if we didn't have a mother everything would be in a big, big mess.
- + And David said simply: A mother is a person too.

Today is the day to specially celebrate what our mothers mean to us - if they have died to remember them with forgiving love and great gratitude, and if they are alive to be sure to say it to them again . . . and to remember those who may have been like a mother to us along the way. Perhaps you remember what the Bible says about mothers - at the end of the Book of Proverbs it says this of one mother:

She is strong and graceful, as well as cheerful about the future. Her words are sensible, and her advice is thoughtful. She takes good care of her family and is never lazy. Her children praise her, and with great pride her husband says, "There are many good women, but you are the best!"
(Proverbs 31:25-31)

Today is the day for children and husbands to do that.

Here is a Mother's Day Prayer in verse form:

Our Father in heaven, whose love is divine,
Thanks for the love of a mother like mine,
And in thy great mercy look down from above
And grant this dear mother the gift of your love.
And all through the year, whatever betide her,
Assure her each day that you are beside her.
And, Father in heaven, show me the way
To lighten her tasks and brighten her day.
And bless her dear heart with the insight to see
That her love means more than the world to me.

Now I want to talk a while about sharing faith. The people who chose our Scripture lessons didn't know today would be Mother's Day, and they chose two of my favorite passages in all the Bible about sharing

faith. Let me say, first of all, I imagine the topic makes most of us uncomfortable. Generally speaking, we're not very good at sharing faith, and many of us have a rather guilty conscience about that. I don't intend to feed that guilt today.

What I would like to do is help us see how sharing faith can be a rather natural thing for us once we break the ice. It doesn't require a lot of study, though it helps to be thoughtful — most of us, I think, like to think of ourselves as thoughtful. And I'll give you an example from my own life — I'm not really any better at this task than some of you.

But first, let's look at these two passages. The first one is from Acts 17, where Paul has come to Athens. Here is the Billy Graham of his day preaching to the Los Angeles of his day, and he begins by noticing that they are very religious people. They had objects of worship all over the place, and they even had one altar dedicated to an unknown god (so they could be sure not to miss any). Paul knew that the problem with people who don't know the true God is not that they have no god but they have too many gods, they make gods of everything their hearts fancy. Do you need a definition of "a god" to understand that? Luther's definition is the best: a god is whatever you look to as your highest good and seek help from in time of trouble. That's what "a god" is: whatever you look to as your highest good and seek help from in time of trouble. That's how "a god" works in our life. It can be money, it can be pleasure, it can be military might, it can be physical beauty...just about anything you set your heart on — all good things but none of them able to bear the weight of being our highest good and our God. We call them idols, and we call the worship of them idolatry — it's a technical name for a very common problem.

Paul comes at it in an interesting, even clever, way. He doesn't try to convince them of their idolatry, but he uses that altar dedicated to the unknown god as his opening. He says, That's the God I want to tell you about, the God who made the world and everything in it. You can't capture this God in a shrine or statue because he stays close to you wherever you go — in fact, in him you live and move and have your very being. And the main assurance of this Paul points to is not the grass and flowers growing in the springtime, marvelous as that is, but Jesus rising from the dead, Easter. What a fine sharing of faith Paul did there in Athens!

So everybody believed and wanted to be baptized? Not at all! A few believed, and some mocked, and

the rest went back to business as usual. But Paul had done his job, he had shared his faith, and soon he was off to another city.

There are three quick lessons for us here. First, don't be discouraged, don't measure your success by whether people believe or mock or go back to business as usual. Just aim to get your message told as best you can. Even Billy Graham gets mocked by some. Second, don't look for a fancy place or a fancy way to share your faith, just do it in your daily, ordinary contact with people. And third, keep at it — just as with everything else (tennis, golf, or tap dancing) you'll be better at it the sixth or eighth time you do it than you are the first.

The second passage is this very nice verse from 1 Peter, where he says:

Don't be intimidated, but in your hearts honor Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence. (3:14b-16)

Very simply that means: if people ask what makes you tick, be ready to tell them. Tell them what makes your world go 'round, tell them what you do when you run into trouble, tell them (when they ask) why you are the hopeful, cheerful, confident person you are, even though you suffer the same diseases and disappointments that others do. Be ready, Peter says — like an actor on the stage, like an athlete on the field, anticipate it, practice it, get good at it. It's a large part of what it means to be a Christian in today's world. I'm not so sure we ought to go ringing people's doorbells, but I am sure we ought to be ready to give a compelling answer to someone who asks us in some way what makes us tick. We want to be able to tell them about the God we believe is as close to us as our next breath, who will see us through every difficulty if we will make him our highest good and our refuge in every trouble. And we want to learn to say that if this God can not only make springtime happen but can even make Easter happen, if he can raise Jesus from the dead, is there any good thing he cannot do? It's really too precious a thing to keep to ourselves, this faith in the God of Easter. I wonder why we are so hesitant about sharing it. Why don't we just let our faces break out in a big smile and tell our story in as confident and cheerful a way as we might tell about a new toothpaste or a new piece of computer software?

Here is something that happened to me once, and this is the story I would tell, I think, if I ever came across an altar to an unknown god or if I wanted to tell somebody what makes me tick. I was coming out of church around 10 o'clock one evening back in Illinois, glad the day was over, wishing it were

warmer, eager for spring to come. I looked up at the north sky, it was clear as a bell, and there was that comet, Hyakutake. Sharon and I had found it several nights earlier so I knew where to look and what to look for. I stood for a few moments at the end of the driveway and thought about what I was seeing — some crusty, icy thing about nine miles wide surrounded by a million miles worth of gas and dust nine million miles away (40 times farther than the moon) that we're likely to have to wait 9,000 years to see again. The 8th Psalm immediately popped into my mind:

When I look at your heavens (that's what I was doing), the moon and the stars that you have made, who are we that you are mindful of us, what are we that you even think about us? Yet you have made us . . . and you know us, you love us, you send us Jesus to show us your heart, and you raise Jesus from the dead just to certify the whole matter.

And then I thought of that line from "Our Town" by Thornton Wilder — our daughters played Emily in their eighth-grade class play. Young Emily says at one point when she is overwhelmed with the grandeur of life and world: Oh, world, you are too wonderful for anybody to realize you! Isn't that the truth! So much of life, not the least our having mothers and our having children, precious gifts from God, just goes right on by us without our thinking how blest we are, what a gift we have been given, and how utterly humble and thankful we ought to be just to be alive in such a world as this and this is perhaps only the beginning of God's whole show. Some of you know how much I love strawberries, and strawberries were just coming into the stores about that time, too. The next Sunday's prayer contained a reference to the God of comets and strawberries, the God who knows how to make the big things and the little things that are so good.

I love the God who gave me my mother and my wife and my children, and I love the God who makes big things like comets and little things like strawberries. Don't you? Will you, please, share your stories of faith and of God?

Let us pray:

Fill us with such faith, dear God, with such thanks for the gift of life and world you give us that we overflow with joy and break out in telling our own story when people wonder why we are the way we are. And even when we are timid with our words, open our eyes to see, to realize the life you give as fully as we can . . . by the power and spirit of him whom you have raised from death already, Jesus our beautiful Lord. Amen.

Pastor Phil Schroeder
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