

Stump the Preacher:
How do we share our progressive faith, in a hostile world?
1 Peter 3:13-17
the Rev. Michelle Slater **August 21, 2011**

I have some questions for you, and I'd like you to just raise your hand. Here we go!

How many people here talked about God or their faith this week:

- with a member of your family?
- with a person at work?
- with a neighbour or acquaintance?
- with a close friend?

What is it that prevents us from talking about God, or sharing our faith with others?

(comments from the congregation)

I'd say two main fears keep us from talking about what we believe, or even revealing that we are Christians or members of a church community:

1. that others will think we are judgmental and close-minded
2. that others will think we are unintelligent

This is the background for our "Stump the Preacher" question for today: "In the writings of Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and others of the 'New Atheists,' many of the arguments used in their criticism of religion are grounded in science that is in conflict with a literal reading of Holy texts. That theology is not the basis for the theology of the mainline liberal denominations like the United Church. How do we liberal Christians distinguish ourselves from fundamentalist readings of the Bible and make our views known and responded to by modern thinkers? Is there Biblical help for us in that endeavour? Are there dangers in putting our views forward?"

So there are actually a couple of questions there, aren't there? First, how do we who might call ourselves *liberal* or *progressive* Christians, distinguish ourselves from fundamentalist or literalist Christians? And second, how do we engage modern thinkers and writers with our interpretation and practice of Christianity?

At the moment, in popular conversation in our culture, it seems like our voice is kind of missing. The Christianity that the "New Atheists" condemn is not, for many of us, a Christianity that we would identify with or feel comfortable with. But when that is pointed out to these "New Atheists", their response is often that we just aren't real Christians. That we are deluding ourselves, that in our hymns and Bible readings and prayers, we are pretending to believe something that we really don't believe and don't expect other people to believe either. And that even pretending to believe it, is harmful.

It's ironic, because it's exactly the same response we can get from those we call "fundamentalists": those who read the Bible very literally, who are sure that Christianity is the only true and valid religion, that there really is a hell that those who do not accept Jesus will be

condemned to forever, and that God's only option for human sexuality is heterosexual marriage, where women are submissive to their husbands. When we say, for example, that we aren't sure about that, that we don't read a condemnation in Scripture of homosexuality, for example, we are told by other Christians that we aren't "real Christians", but only pretending to be, while still living according to the world's standards rather than God's.

So it seems that we just can't win. And maybe that's the problem, right there. Because when we try to defend or define ourselves over and against the views or criticisms of *others*, we will never win. What do we do, then, if we don't loudly point out how we're not like "them", those other, judgmental, intolerant Christians over there? Do we just keep silent, resigned to being misinterpreted and misjudged if we confess to being a Christian? Hope that the way we live and treat people will show that we're not "those" kind of Christians?

Or, is there is a third way (as there usually is when Jesus is involved)? The writer of the letter called First Peter in the Bible says this: *"Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect."*

You see, I think the only way we can share our beliefs, convictions and practice of Christianity is through authentic personal relationships, through respectful one-on-one conversations and encounters. You can see it in Scripture, actually, in the ways that people come to follow Jesus. It is always through a personal encounter, either with Jesus himself, or with another follower who invites someone else to "come and see."

And the invitation is to "come and see" the way following Jesus has changed that person's life. It is a personal testimony, a bearing witness to the gifts of life, love, healing and transformation that person has experienced in Jesus. Never is someone brought to follow Jesus through an explanation of doctrine, or a careful delineation of all the beliefs a Christian "should" have. Neither is anyone convinced by threats of condemnation or damnation. No, what interests people in Scripture in following Jesus, in coming to know God more fully and live God's way more deeply, is hearing what it has meant for someone else they know. Hearing someone give "an account of the hope" that is in them.

It reminds me of the modern 12 Step movement, in fact. I have been to a few meetings of the Lifeline group here at the church, when I've been invited to special gatherings. Much like our worship service, their meetings have a set schedule, with one person chairing the meeting (or presiding). There are readings from "the Big Book" (written by Bill W. and Dr. Bob, the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous), and they even take a collection.

But the heart of the meeting is the personal story-telling. The presider invites various members up, usually with no warning, and each person gives their testimony, telling the truth about their lives, their powerlessness over alcohol or drugs, the nightmare that their life became, and how their life has changed since becoming sober.

For many members, it is these stories that keep them coming and keep them sober, not the readings they do from "the Big Book" either at the meetings or at home. It is the stories that remind them of their own story. It is the stories that help keep them honest, and remind them that they are still addicts and always will be in recovery. It is the stories that remind them that

they belong to this group of people, sharing the same struggles and also the same hope.

The amazing thing, to me, about the 12 step movement is not how successful it is. The amazing thing, to me, is how widely it has spread and how it continues to grow and attract new members who need it...despite having *no* public profile, *no* governing hierarchies, and *no* advertising. In fact, all of those things are forbidden. The only way AA and NA grow is by word of mouth. In other words, by personal relationship. By one person saying to another, "I've been where you are. Whenever you're ready, I'll take you to a meeting with me."

Or in other words, to "*make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.*" It's probably impossible to get Christopher Hitchens or Richard Dawkins to accept that we are also legitimate, faithful Christians. It's definitely impossible to force them to respond to our expression of Christianity in their writings. It's equally impossible to either convince other Christians that our experience of God and understanding of Christianity is the right one, or for some, even a valid one.

But according to Scripture, neither of those things is our job. Our calling is simply to give "an account of the hope" that is in us. To tell our own stories of how we have encountered God, and how God has encountered us. To share our personal testimony of the healing, forgiveness, new life we have found in a relationship with God through Jesus. To give our own witness, which is the only witness we can give, to how living deeply in God is giving us a deeper and richer and more sustaining life. And to do so "with gentleness and respect."

Now, that's not so hard, is it? All right...it is hard. I admit that. It's hard for all those reasons you called out earlier. It's hard, because of the ever-present possibility that we will be judged negatively. That that we will be condemned, written-off, avoided. That we will provoke discomfort, eye-rolls, awkwardness. That we will be patronized, insulted, or ignored. All of those things are true. There is always a risk of that.

But there is another risk: the risk that someone will actually take us seriously. Will actually listen to what we have to say. Will ponder it in their heart. And maybe, one day, find their way into a church someday. Even come with you sometime when you invite them.

So, how do we share our faith (however we might label it), in an indifferent or even hostile world? Maybe the answer is simply, like Jesus, to do so one person at a time. One encounter at a time. One conversation at a time. Speaking not for the church worldwide, or the United Church of Canada or even for our congregation, but just for ourselves. Sharing the God we know, the experiences we have, and the hope we've found.

May it be so for us. Amen.