

Testimony as sharing hope

A sermon on Matthew 8:5–13; 1 Peter 2:11–12; 3:13–17a

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I want to talk about testimony as sharing hope. Not sharing faith but sharing hope. And I want to talk about how it happens.

In this morning's reading from Matthew's Gospel (8:5–13), Jesus is entering Capernaum when he—as so often happens—is interrupted. Who interrupts him? A surprising person, a centurion. Why is that surprising? Because centurions are scary people. They are soldiers, Roman soldiers, occupation soldiers. They have a bad reputation, a reputation for violence. And they are Gen-

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tiles—unclean outsiders. They don't keep the Sabbath; they don't wash their hands properly; they don't keep a kosher kitchen. Associating with them pollutes Jewish people. So Jews associate with centurions as little as possible: they view them as dangerous and dirty.

The centurion comes up to Jesus and appeals to him: "Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress."

Jesus responds in a surprising way: "I will come and cure him." Jesus is willing to go to the other's home, to enter his world, to eat his food, to live by his customs, to be polluted by his non-kosher environment. Jesus in effect says to the outsider: I'm not going to stay in my own world, where I'm safe and comfortable, where I know the rules. I'm willing to go into your world.

The outsider responds: Jesus, I'm not worthy of your visit, and you don't need to come. You've got spiritual authority. Only say the word, and my servant will be healed. In the Roman army I know about authority; my soldiers do what I say. That's how it is with you, Jesus. You don't need to come to my place to heal my servant. Just say the word.

When Jesus hears him, he is amazed, dumbfounded. “In no one in Israel have I found such faith.” In this unclean, dangerous outsider, Jesus finds greater faith than in any Jewish insider.

The centurion’s faith causes Jesus to testify to his hope. Jesus’ whole life is driven by his hope of God’s kingdom breaking in. It is not Jesus’ *wish* or his *preference* that God’s kingdom would come. No, it is Jesus’ firm *conviction* that this reign is what God is bringing about. Jesus prays all the time: “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.” This hope, this confident expectation, empowers everything Jesus does: this hope is going to be fulfilled, and this centurion is evidence of it.

Jesus says, “I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.” This is where history is going: toward this banquet. Outsiders and insiders are going to eat together; Gentiles will be there with Jews. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will be there, with this centurion and other Gentiles after him. There’s going to be hospitality, eating together—a potluck for all peoples! Enemies will eat together, reconciled to one another, reconciled to God, reconciled in Jesus Christ.

Jesus says to the centurion: “Go; let it be done for you according to your faith.” And the servant is healed in that very hour.

How typical this is of Jesus. He expects God to be working. He is ready to go into other people’s territory. He sees that the unexpected person, the outsider, may be the one who has faith. And he sees it all with the eyes of hope.

For Jesus, history isn’t meaningless. God is in charge of it, and God is moving it toward reconciliation, all-embracing reconciliation—with God and with other humans. By implication, Jesus is saying, you don’t need to be afraid. You can live by hope.

Sharing hope

Sharing hope: that’s what Jesus is about, and it is what we’re about as Christians. That’s how God wants our church to grow: not by engaging in arguments, not by telling people of other Christian traditions why Mennonites are right and they are wrong, not by persuading Muslims in rational terms that Jesus is God. It’s not a matter of arguing and convincing; it’s a matter of incarnating and explaining. And it’s about hope.

The New Testament contains no admonitions to engage in evangelism. It does not instruct us: Brothers and sisters, share your faith with outsiders. But listen to these words from 1 Peter 2

The New Testament does not instruct us: Share your faith with outsiders. Instead it says, Beloved, outsiders are watching you. Always be ready to give an accounting for the hope that is in you.

and 3: Beloved, you're living as aliens and exiles; outsiders are watching you. They may criticize you. But don't be afraid. "Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated. . . . Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you" (1 Pet. 3:14–15).

Jesus' disciple Peter knows: people are afraid. People are living in a culture of fear. "Do not fear what they fear." Why not? Because Christ is Lord, and he suffered to bring you to God. So you can have hope.

And in a fearful world, if you have hope, you'll live in different ways; you'll do odd things. And people will ask you, Why do you have hope? Why do you make odd decisions about your life? And then you can engage in sharing hope. You can tell others about the hope-filled life you've got in Christ.

Where does sharing hope happen?

Where does this sharing of hope happen? It begins in hospitality, in having guests and being guests.

I like to think of hospitality as a stool with three legs: welcoming one another, welcoming the outsider, and going into the outsiders' territory and accepting their welcome.

Welcoming one another. Here we offer hospitality within a family. When we go to church, we meet with brothers and sisters. "Welcome one another, as God in Christ has welcomed you" (Rom. 15:6). We listen to one another; we give time to one another; we support one another; we share a common space. We are pretty good at this leg of the stool. The buzz after our worship services indicates this.

Welcoming the outsider. Here we extend the hospitality of a host. Our churches often have signs that say, "Everyone welcome." And when outsiders come to our services, at our best we make them feel valued and listened to. We invite them to our homes or to a restaurant for Sunday lunch, or we make a date for

coffee. We often find this second aspect of hospitality more difficult than the first. Talking to new people makes us uncomfortable. And we're busy; we have our family gatherings, and inviting people for Sunday lunch disturbs our routines. Our visitors are busy, too.

But the big problem is this: despite our welcome signs, not that many outsiders want to come to our services. And when they do come, most congregations aren't brilliant at welcoming them. Remember: when outsiders come, they're coming into our space, and we're in control! We determine the terms on which they come. The outsiders feel uncertainty; our churches are strange environments. So we're not that good at putting the second leg of

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the stool in place, at welcoming the outsider, in part because we don't have a lot of practice. So we desperately need the stool's third leg.

Going into the space of the outsider. Here we receive the hospitality of the outsider. This is what Jesus offers. He tells the centurion, I will come to your house. And he commands his disciples to enter the houses of other people, eating and drinking what they

provide (Luke 10:5–8). Jesus encourages his disciples to have the kind of attitude he has. You're going into places where you are not in control but where God is at work. You're not going to stay in your own world, where you're comfortable, where you know the rules. Instead, you're going to enter to the world of the outsider.

This third leg of the stool—entering the world of the outsider—is the one we as individuals and congregations need to develop if we want to participate in God's mission. It's there that conversations about faith and hope happen.

How do we go into the outsider's space?

How do we go into the space of the outsider? We do it by entering into liminality. A liminal space is a place in between, a threshold, a place between worlds, a place where we're a bit insecure. To enter into liminality, we've got to leave our buildings and structures and enter spaces where we are not in charge, where surprises can happen, where discoveries can take place.

What does a liminal space look like? Here are three examples.

A liminal space is a common activity. It's something, generally a nonchurchy activity, that local people organize to meet widely perceived needs. So we join with others in tutoring in a local school, or surveying the assets and needs of an area, or cleaning up the neighborhood, or painting over gang graffiti, or playing in the local softball league. All these activities fit in with Christian values and can be expressions of God's mission. So when our neighbors invite us to get involved in local concerns, we say yes to these projects that matter to everyone—and we're building relationships. We as members of local churches can invite friends and neighbors to work together, with us and others, on something that others may have initiated but that matters to us all.

A liminal space is a common cause. We want to save the local school building from the wrecker's ball, or to found an Amnesty International group to write letters in behalf of prisoners of conscience, or to stand by the courthouse to read the names of Americans and Iraqis who have died in the war. Or we may deal with homelessness by taking an immigrant mother and her children into our home. These involve Christians doing interesting things, odd things, and they raise questions: Why do you think you can take on the city council and save the school? Why do you care about the war, or share your kitchen and bathroom with people from another country?

A liminal space is hanging out. We choose to be visible and available. We don't just drive our cars into our garages and disappear. Instead we choose to do time-consuming things visibly, in ways that enable us to meet people. So we wash our cars in the driveway and mow our lawns and say hi to neighborhood kids. We bring cookies to the neighbors, and neighbors bring us enchiladas. We need advice: we ask neighbors how to control weeds in our lawn—whether or not we take that advice! We need help: neighbors jumpstart our cars. We intentionally inhabit spaces that make us available and vulnerable and enable us to learn to know people.

What happens in liminal spaces?

What kinds of things happen when we enter liminal spaces?

Attitudes change. As we work together in the liminal space of a common project, as we hang out in a liminal space, everyone

changes and learns. Nonchurchgoers see us Christians—who obviously go to church on Sunday mornings—living as ordinary people, accessible people. And yet we are also doing interesting things and participating in activities that make a difference to the community. When nonchurchgoers see themselves as collaborators with Christians in actions that grow out of common concerns, change begins. We develop friendships; we discover a sense of respect for and commitment to one another.

People eat together. Christians and their nonchurchgoing friends who have worked together in the liminal space of a common project now gather in another unthreatening space—a backyard, for example, where there is a barbecue. Or a restaurant or a coffee shop. These are liminal spaces, which neither party controls. Even the home can be a liminal space. It is especially important for Christians to accept the hospitality of nonchurchgoers and to eat their food. And what happens then?

Conversations happen. As people work together, they talk. As they eat in backyards and coffee shops, friendships develop. When people sense that they can respect us and trust us, they often want to talk. They like to talk about their hobbies. They may express their worries: they are afraid about losing their jobs; at times they are facing big questions. We listen, and people appreciate that.

Often people ask questions: Why do you . . . ? Why do you seem less worried than other people? What's this mutual aid thing—I see people bringing you fresh vegetables. Why do you support each other? And you seem buoyant; you seem to have more hope than I do. Why? Don't you know how awful things are—look at all the factory closings and lost jobs; look at the stock market. Look at global warming, the chances of terrorist attack, the likelihood of the use of nuclear weapons. Don't you know that the terrorists have it in for us?

People notice and wonder about our activities: You went on that disaster service thing—what is it about Mennonites that makes you think you ought to have a disaster service? Look, why do you go on thinking that things can change, that it is worthwhile working on reconciliation? I saw a photo in the local paper of a leading Mennonite talking with the Iranian president. Why? In these questions there may be a mixture of attraction, irritation, and bafflement.

What do we say?

We explain. We answer questions. The conversations generally center on practical questions, but at times they deal with motivation and hope. Especially hope. The typical North American today is afraid; we live in a culture of fear. So much around us tells us we should be afraid—of salmonella or Al Qaeda or high cholesterol.

So what, in the culture of fear, is hope? For many people, hope is a negative thing. It's hope that things won't get worse, and that the bad things won't happen until after we die. Missiologist Jon Bonk, who studies Western culture, puts it like this: "The great purpose of [modern] life . . . is . . . to move from birth to death as comfortably as possible."¹

I think of conversations Eleanor and I had in England over the years with two people. We had conversations with our atheist Jewish friend Mike, who lived next door. We learned that Mike thinks North American culture is great, that he loves jazz, that he

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hates the pope. He blames Christianity for the conflict in Northern Ireland. And he asked us: Why do you keep going to Northern Ireland every year? We said we went to visit peacemakers. The Christians are the most courageous people we know; we're supporting them and learning from them.

And we had conversations with another atheist Jewish friend, the socialist activist Bernard, who could not understand why we

Christians took part in peace marches. Peace marches are great, but Bernard's question was, what does God have to do with peace? Bernard was baffled but intrigued. He took this question so seriously that he interviewed us for an article he was writing for a socialist magazine.

Encounters like these are not strange. I'm convinced that every church that encourages its members to enter into liminal spaces will have similar encounters. When we meet people, we have conversations. Opinions and concerns fly back and forth. And when we do something odd or interesting, people ask questions.

There are no guarantees about where these conversations will go. But the missional God is at work. The Holy Spirit is hovering over our encounters with our neighbors and friends. In them, this

is the kind of thing that happens: we're interested in people, so we ask them questions: What's life like? What are your concerns? What do you hope for? What do you care about? And we listen carefully, and we hear people express faith or no faith. Many people lack the capacity—the vocabulary—to talk about their inner longings. Whatever they say, we respect.

And if we listen carefully to them, people eventually ask us similar questions and listen to us, too. What we say will depend on the person and the relationship; it won't be a formula. But it may contain empathy: I know things are really rocky for you. It will express hope: I've got hope, and I've found hope to be a gift. It may well say where that hope comes from: I do what I do because of Jesus. I believe that Jesus shows me what God is like. I've given my life to him. Of course it's not easy—look at God suffering, in Jesus on the cross. But I believe that Jesus' way is the

way to life. I'm not afraid, because I believe Jesus rose from the dead and the last word is not No; it is Yes.

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And above all, what we say will relate to personal experience. In England I could talk about the Northern Ireland peace process, which has succeeded beyond all expectations, in which Catholic and Protestant paramilitaries have “put guns beyond use.” In Indiana I can recall my childhood. When I

was a kid, Goshen was one of many towns in the Midwest where African Americans were not welcome after dark. And now the U.S. has an African American president! By God's grace, things can change and reconciliation can happen. By God's grace, I've changed, too.

How does this kind of conversation affect people? What happened, you may wonder, to my two atheist Jewish friends? They and we experienced the third leg of the stool, hospitality in the liminal space. We ate together, in pubs, in their houses, and in ours. Eventually we invited them both to the church, to experience the second leg of the stool—welcome of outsiders—and to see the first leg in operation—the members' loving hospitality for one another. Both Mike and Bernard came. With both, we engaged in sharing hope, hope based in Jesus Christ.

After thirty-eight years of friendship, I love Mike and enjoy his company, and he's still cynical. He is getting old now, and I'm afraid dying will be hard for him. Bernard, on the other hand, was drawn to Jesus, the source of peace. We watched him begin to pray. Bernard became a believer and was baptized in the hospital just before he died of cancer. Inscribed on his tombstone, very visible in a secular London cemetery, are the words "Love never fails," and under them is an etching of a lion lying with a lamb, symbol of reconciliation. And then: "Bernard Misrahi, 1952–2003, campaigner for justice, carer for children." I thank God for Bernard. His life and faith give me the eyes of hope.

Anticipating the banquet

Jesus told the centurion, "I will come to *your* house." To be effective in mission we need to develop a hospitality stool with three legs. We need to be hospitable to each other and welcome one another as God in Christ has welcomed us. We also need to be hospitable to the outsiders who come to our church, and to learn how to do this sensitively. But most important for us is the third leg: "I will come to your house." We need to go into the liminal space where we are outsiders, work with people who don't come to church, hang out with them, and experience their hospitality.

About 75 percent of people in the US do not go to church. Many have had bad experiences with church. Some of them are angry with God; many of them are hungry for God. All need hope, the hope that can come from life in Christ. When we get involved with the nonchurchgoers—working with them, eating with them, going to their houses—it will change us, and by God's grace it may well change others. Then Jesus' vision will come closer: Many will come from east and west and will eat at table with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of God.

What a banquet it will be—and it's already begun.

Note

¹Jonathan J. Bonk, *Missions and Money: Affluence as a Missionary Problem—Revisited*, American Society of Missiology series 15 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 107.

About the author

Alan Kreider taught church history and mission at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (Elkhart, Indiana). He has just written, with Eleanor Kreider, *Worship and Mission after Christendom* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 2009). He preached this sermon at Waterford Mennonite Church (Goshen, Indiana), on February 15, 2009.