

April 23, 2017
Acts 2:1-4, 12-15, 22-24, 36-41
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“More Than a Name”

Every preacher goes through the experience of preaching that first sermon. My first one was prompted by the TRIM program’s Supervised Ministry experience. I wrote the sermon and sent it to Pastor David for his evaluation. I remember having to choose 10 people in the congregation to evaluate my sermon content and delivery -- you might have been one of them. That was back in the day when I still swore I would never be a pastor! Now that you’ve heard me for six years, you probably have your own evaluations of my sermon! You are a patient bunch!

I have learned there are three important rules for preachers: stand up, speak up and sit down. Or as George Burns puts it: A good sermon should have a good beginning and a good ending, and they should be as close together as possible.

There are some good stories about preachers and sermons to share for Holy Humor Sunday.

Story #1: Having been bored witless by the world's most boring preacher, Jack came out of church before the preacher had finished his sermon. Outside he met a friend who asked, "Has he finished, then?" His friend replied, "Oh yes, he's finished, but he won't stop!"

Story #2: A pastor "gave one of the world's shortest sermons on Holy Humor Sunday. He announced that the focus of his talk would be on sin. 'Don't do it,' he said from the pulpit. 'Amen.' Then he sat down."

Story #3: It was the new pastor’s first church, and the first month he was there he officiated eight memorial services. Consequently, he had limited time for Sunday morning sermon preparation. So he simply repeated that first Sunday’s sermon the next three Sundays.

The church board complained to the District Minister. “What should we do? This new pastor has used the same sermon four times in a row!” The District Minister was surprised, but after a moment asked them what the sermon was about. The members puzzled over this simple question. They really couldn’t remember. The District Minister declared, “Then let him use it one more time.”¹

Story #4: An elderly priest, who had spent 50 years preaching in parish missions, dreamed one night he arrived at the pearly gates. When Peter saw it was Father Clyde, he said, “I’m sorry, but you can’t come in yet. You’ll have to spend three months in Purgatory.” “But why?” asked the priest. “I have spent my whole life preaching all over Australia!”

“Be calm, Father,” Peter said. “You won’t have to work. We have a comfortable chair for you in a comfortable room. You won’t have to do anything except listen to your own sermons day and night. We taped all the sermons you preached at those missions.” The priest woke up in a sweat!²

“There was another remarkable young man who, at age thirty, hung up his carpenter’s apron, laid down his hammer, trudged from his hometown, and found a spot on a hillside where he gathered a crowd and began to preach.” His first recorded sermon was a homiletic masterpiece called the Sermon on the Mount, which gave us a set of ethics, images and instructions that are still relevant today. From the first, he spoke as if he were author and interpreter of Scripture.³ That man, of course, was Jesus.

Acts 2 gives us another first sermon -- by none other than Peter. When you think of it, Peter seems totally unqualified to preach. He frequently got thinking and talking in the wrong order. He was the first to identify Jesus as the Messiah, but then rebuked Jesus for saying he would be put to death in Jerusalem during Passover. When

¹ Jean H. Vandergrift, “A promise kept,” June 8, 2003, *University Christian Church Web Site*, scn.org.

² Cal and Rose Samra, *Holy Humor: A book of inspirational wit and cartoons*. Guideposts, 1996, p. 34-35.

³ Robert J. Morgan, “First Sermons,” www.donelson.org/sermons

witnessing the transfiguration, Peter wanted to form a building committee. Jesus gave him a chance to walk on water, but Peter lost faith and began sinking. In the garden of Gethsemane when Jesus needed him, he fell asleep. When Jesus chose to go peacefully with his captors, Peter cut off a soldier's ear. And finally, instead of defending Jesus during the trial, he denied he knew him -- three times!⁴

Although Peter was a bumbling, impetuous disciple before his first sermon, he had learned the truth about Jesus the hard way. No one knew better than he that Jesus could forgive and restore a betrayer. He had experienced something no theological degree could match.

On the day of Pentecost, when the Spirit came with wind and fire, and people of different nations and languages spoke and understood each other, the Holy Spirit made a preacher out of Peter. It was like everything he experienced up till then made sense and he felt an urgency to explain the truth to everyone.

There are parts of Peter's sermon that make me uneasy, like accusing his Jewish audience that "you killed Jesus." That's like those who accuse all Muslims of being terrorists! "Pentecost" is actually a Greek name for the Hebrew festival known as the Feast of Weeks. The festival occurs fifty days after Passover and celebrates the end of the grain harvest. Pentecost was one of the pilgrimage festivals, so devout Jews from many nations came from as far as 1000 miles. Thus many of the Jews to whom Peter spoke had not been eyewitnesses to Jesus' life and death. They may never have heard of Jesus of Nazareth, so why should they be accused? But aside from that, Peter's sermon encapsulates the heart of the gospel.

People in the streets tried to make sense of the eerie wind and fire and mixed-up languages. "These people must be drunk," they said. Peter responded, standing with the eleven. "All of you, listen up! This Jesus, whom you crucified, is more than just a name. He is more than a prophet and a good man. He is the Messiah, the Holy One proclaimed by David and our other prophets. This is the Savior for

⁴ "Peter's first sermon," www.homileticsonline.com

whom we have been waiting for generations. Every single one of you is a witness to this truth. Whether you saw Jesus with your own eyes or are now hearing the good news for the very first time, you are a witness to what I am telling you today.”⁵

In that case, we are witnesses, too! Peter is saying, Jesus is more than David or a prophet. He is more than a name. He is the Messiah we have been waiting for. He was rejected, killed and buried, but now, having risen from the dead, he returned to his Father and the Holy Spirit has come.

That begins to sound like a creed! This set of beliefs -- Jesus crucified, died, buried, resurrected and now exalted -- form one of the earliest creeds of the church. While the Church of the Brethren makes a point of having no creed but the New Testament, it's all there, and Peter's sermon reminds us that Christ is Lord.

Something happened to Peter at Pentecost. Jesus became more to him than a Messiah who would save the Jews from the Romans. The Holy Spirit gave him understanding and a passion to share what he knew with the Pentecost crowd. He exalted Jesus as the Christ, the name given to Jesus after the resurrection. The crowd needed to know the truth about Christ.

The response to Peter's first sermon was amazing. Verses 37-42 tell it this way.

³⁷ Now when [the crowd] heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?” ³⁸ Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit . . . ⁴¹ So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. ⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”

A similar modern day story happened at Brooklyn Tabernacle Church. Thee Seekers members may remember studying the book *Fresh*

⁵ David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide* John Knox Press, 2010, p. 378.

***Wind, Fresh Fire* by Jim Cymbala many years ago. In 1971 he and his wife started the church with four people. In time they had 10,000 in attendance. The center of their church was prayer. He started out with a Tuesday night prayer meeting. While the people were upstairs in worship, there were people in the basement praying for the conversion of the worshipers. In the book he states, “A Christian church is where . . . people are listening to the Spirit.”⁶**

Jesus is more than a name. Back in my teens retreat leaders would use the four Quaker questions as ice-breakers to get new groups comfortable talking with each other. The first three were nonthreatening: “Where did you live between ages 5-12 and what were the winters like?” “How was your home heated?” “Where and/or who was the center of warmth in your life as a child?” The last question was more personal. “When did God become a “warm” being to you and how did this happen?” Another way to say that is “When did God become more than a name to you?” My story is a time that God answered a specific heart-wrenching prayer. I really didn’t expect a response from God to my prayer. As a result, my faith in God was strengthened because I realized that God knew me by name, he heard my prayer, and he cared about me.

We’ll return to the story of Pentecost in a few Sundays. In the meantime, please ponder the Quaker question for yourself. “When did God become more than a name to you?” I would love to hear your stories, but George Burns is saying it’s time to end this sermon! Maybe you can tell me your story over lunch sometime?

⁶ Roger Bower, “Are you baptized by the Holy Spirit?” June 8, 2003, www.stmargarets.org.