

LIVING LIFE OUT LOUD

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St. Francis of Assisi: “Preach the Good News everywhere; when necessary, use words”? What do you make of that counsel?

God didn’t just send a message; He sent a Messenger.

John 1:6-18 (NLT)

⁶ **God sent a man**, John the Baptist, ⁷ to tell about the light so that everyone might believe because of his testimony. ⁸ John himself was not the light; he was simply a witness to tell about the light.

¹⁵ John testified about him when he shouted to the crowds, “This is the one I was talking about when I said, ‘Someone is coming after me who is far greater than I am, for he existed long before me.’”

¹⁶ From his abundance we have all received one gracious blessing after another. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses, but God’s unfailing love and faithfulness came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God. But the unique One, who himself God, is near to the Father’s heart. **He has revealed God to us.**

The Gospel (Good News) is not only verbal, it is visible and tangible.

Take note of the visible and tangible elements of John’s experience of the Good News:

1 John 1 (NASB)

¹ What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life—

² and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us—

³ what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.

Do you have a story to tell?

John’s story was bound up with Jesus’ story. When he tells us Jesus’ story, we hear it from John’s perspective, with John’s emphases, and recorded with John’s emotional reactions. So, as he tells us Jesus’ story, we also get a glimpse of John’s story (even though he tries to remove himself from the limelight, as did his namesake, the Baptist).

H. Ernest Nichol (London, 1896) wrote these lyrics:

We’ve a story to tell to the nations

That will turn their hearts to the right.

A story of truth and mercy,

A story of peace and light.

We’ve a message to give to the nations,

That the Lord who reigns up above

Has sent us His Son to save us,

And show us that God is love.

2 Corinthians 3 (NLT)

² *Your lives are a letter written in our hearts; everyone can read it and recognize our good work among you.* ³ *Clearly, you are a letter from Christ showing the result of our ministry among you. This "letter" is written not with pen and ink, but with the Spirit of the living God. It is carved not on tablets of stone, but on human hearts.*

You also have a story, which is now bound up with Jesus' story! His story can be found in the Book. It is finished. Yours is unfolding, as I speak. How these two intertwine is illuminating, for it is a story of God reaching down to man in unconditional love, and the responsive story of a person (you) reaching back to God with resilient faith. This is no fairy tale ("Once upon a time...then they lived happily ever after."), but a real-life saga — full of stops and starts, failures and successes, weariness and enthusiasm, fear and courage. That is a story of real faith.

Some will object: "It's all about Him; I don't matter. He's the One who is doing it all; I am only a servant." I disagree! Remove *you* and the story changes dramatically. It cannot be the same without *you*. Yes, you are His servant. Yes, you are just following Him. Yes, you are just doing what He gives you to do. But, *you are!* It is not another; it is you. Your background, your experiences, your personality, your relationships, your faith, and your achievements. This is your story, and His, together. You are one of the main characters in this story.

Don't sugar-coat it; don't pretend you've had no problems. Just tell the story of God's faithfulness and grace, complete with personal illustrations — *that's the message!*

There are probably certain parts of your story which are especially meaningful to you (they may bring tears to your eyes each time you tell them), and other parts which don't seem as significant. Remember the old adage: "One man's junk is another man's treasure"? It likely has an application to your story, too. Parts that you regard as less significant may be the very thing someone else needs to hear, while parts that mean so much to you may not impress another person.

This is why we all need the Holy Spirit to guide us in our witness to other people. He knows what is appropriate for the moment, and He will draw it from the content of your memory and imagination.

Your story / His story

John 15 (NIV)

²⁶ *When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me.* ²⁷ *And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning.*

This is a "cooperative venture" between you and the Holy Spirit. Your experience validates His truth and His truth verifies your experience.

Your experience may have been positive or negative, pleasant or painful, a success or a failure, but either may be used as evidence of God's truth. For instance, if you wandered away from God and experienced an abundance of good things, yet became more and more miserable until you turned to Jesus, doesn't the Bible describe that very scenario?

Psalms 73

⁴ *They seem to live such painless lives; their bodies are so healthy and strong.*

⁵ *They don't have troubles like other people; they're not plagued with problems like everyone else.*

⁶ They wear pride like a jeweled necklace
and clothe themselves with cruelty.
⁷ These fat cats have everything
their hearts could ever wish for!
⁸ They scoff and speak only evil;
in their pride they seek to crush others.
⁹ They boast against the very heavens,
and their words strut throughout the earth.
¹⁰ And so the people are dismayed and confused,
drinking in all their words.
¹¹ “What does God know?” they ask.
“Does the Most High even know what’s happening?”
¹² Look at these wicked people—
enjoying a life of ease while their riches multiply.
¹⁶ I tried to understand why the wicked prosper.
But what a difficult task it is!
¹⁷ Then I went into your sanctuary, O God,
and I finally understood the destiny of the wicked.
¹⁸ Truly, you put them on a slippery path
and send them sliding over the cliff to destruction.
¹⁹ In an instant they are destroyed,
completely swept away by terrors.
²⁰ When you arise, O Lord,
you will laugh at their silly ideas
as a person laughs at dreams in the morning.

Proverbs 11 (NLT)

¹⁸ Evil people get rich for the moment, but the reward of the godly will last.

Or, perhaps you wandered away from God and found only misery upon misery, until at last you repented and turned back to Christ. Doesn't the Bible also describe that situation?

Luke 15 (NLT)

¹¹ Jesus told them this story: “A man had two sons. ¹² The younger son told his father, ‘I want my share of your estate now before you die.’ So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons.
¹³ “A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living. ¹⁴ About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. ¹⁵ He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶ The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything.
¹⁷ “When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, ‘At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸ I will go home to my father and say, “Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, ¹⁹ and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant.”’
²⁰ “So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. ²¹ His son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.’
²² “But his father said to the servants, ‘Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. ²³ And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, ²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.’ So the party began.

I say, reality affirms truth and truth affirms reality. Since God is real and the Author of all that is, His imprint can be found wherever reality is engaged, regardless of its appearance. God's truth is the bedrock of reality, and man's truth is extracted from reality (or should be). We don't need to fear association with what is real; therefore, we don't need to fear our failures or our uncertainties. While we may not yet understand how certain realities express or reveal God's nature, they will ultimately be found to do exactly that.

Bottom line: when sharing your faith, just be yourself. You don't have to disclose all your "dirty laundry," but don't put on airs or pious pretense.

When you share the Gospel message with someone else, don't just quote Scripture to them. It is vital to incorporate pertinent personal experiences that illustrate and confirm the message of Scripture. This is blending your story with His.

It is equally important, when you tell your story (testimony) that you use Scripture portions that corroborate and explain your experiences. This is blending His story with yours. Reality affirms truth; truth affirms reality.

You want to become so familiar with sharing your faith-story, that you can tell it in one minute, or ten minutes, or thirty minutes — depending on the occasion — dropping off less pertinent elements to make it shorter, or engaging more dialogue as time allows.

Notice, I suggested engaging *more dialogue* as a means of extending your story. Sharing your faith as a monologue is the least effective way to do so. Try to engage your hearer's interest by involving them in the story by means of thoughtful questions that draw out *their* story and connect it also to His.

Outline of Things to Come

In order to share your story and His story easily, you will need a simple outline, one which can be easily remembered. Here's an outline I've used for years:

1. God is both loving and just.
2. People are sinners and cannot save themselves.
3. Jesus never sinned, then He became our substitute.
4. We must respond with real faith.

For each point in the outline, identify at least one Scripture portion that nails it for you, and prepare at least one illustration (from your own experience, if it fits). The number of components will naturally increase as your knowledge of the Bible and your experiences with God increase. In this way, you can weave together the Gospel story and your story, making it both eternal truth *and* contemporary reality.

Eliminating Christianese

After reading through the Bible and spending time with other Christians in the church, it is normal to develop the use of Christian jargon. Without thinking about it, theological terms and expressions like "under the blood" or "in His presence" become common parts of our speech. The only problem is that such expressions are *not* common to unchurched people or are commonly *misused* and either do not communicate at all or are misunderstood.

When communicating the Gospel, Keep It Simple, Saints.

In promulgating your esoteric cogitations or articulating your superficial sentimentalities and amicable philosophical or psychological observations, beware of platitudinous ponderosity. Let your conversational communications possess a compacted conciseness, a clarified comprehensibility, a coalescent cogency, and a concatenated consistency. Eschew obfuscation and all conglomeration of flatulent garrulity, jejune babblement, and asinine affectations. Let your extemporaneous descantings and unpremeditated expatiations have intelligibility and voracious vivacity without rodomontade or thra-sonical bombast. Sedulously avoid all polysyllabic profundity, pompous prolificacy, and vain vapid verbosity.

In short "Be brief and don't use big words."

Write down your faith-story to make it clear. Then, look it over and circle the words or phrases that you think may not be easily understood by an unchurched hearer. Then try to replace each of them with something more easily understood. Or, if you must use a theological term, be prepared to offer a simple definition to make it understandable.

Be the Message

Remember, *you* are the message. Make your connection to Jesus Christ plain. Be good news! Be real, be visible, be approachable, be compassionate. And keep it simple. You have a great story to tell!