

“Let Them In”

1 Peter 4:7-11; Acts 1:4-8;
Matthew 28:16-20

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I'm thankful for the opportunity to speak this morning. I've been thinking about the concepts in this passage a lot recently in my job working with families, and I would love to pass these on to you.

I want to start with a quote, and maybe you've heard this before: “Preach the Gospel at all times. When necessary, use words.” This is attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, and it embodies a lot of his world view that we live out the Gospel, that the Gospel is something that comes out of us. It is something that involves our entire lives. It guards the way we do service and reach out to others. It is flowing out of us.

It's a great quote. I've used it in a lot of sermons. I've used it in a lot of conversations. The problem is that it was probably never said by St. Francis of Assisi. It is attributed to him, and there are definitely quotes of his that have a similar vibe, but this direct statement of “only use words when necessary” was probably invented in the 1990s in America.

I think it says something about the way we think about the idea of evangelism, of reaching out, of the Great Commission. I think it says something about some pretty bad evangelism that has happened in our lives and our culture, if I'm right. I also think that it is a starting point for us to think about what it means to be people of the Great Commission now, in our context, in our culture. In the moment that we are in right now, what does it look like for us to go forward?

I think it also says that evangelism gives us the heebie jeebies. Do any of you have the heebie jeebies when you think about evangelism? I have the heebie jeebies when I think about evangelism. I am a professional Christian, and I have the heebie jeebies when I think about evangelism. I hope this morning, in this conversation, we can de-heebie jeebie a little bit, that we can bring our heebie jeebies down just enough to be able to imagine what it could look like to live out the great commission today. What it could look like to be people of witness today. What it could look like to go forward with the message of Jesus today. What it could look like to be Jesus' witnesses here and in Pullman, and in Viola, and to the ends of the earth.

I'm going to start by looking at the passage from Acts. I actually want to focus on this more than on the Great Commission itself, just because I love this passage so much. I love where it starts because I think we get some insights into the hearts of the disciples and their view of being commissioned, as well.

The passage doesn't start with the disciples going to Jesus and saying, “All right, Jesus, you've risen from the dead. Let's go do this. What are we doing next? Let's go reach some new places. We're sorry for wanting to call down fire and burn up Samaria.

We want to go back there with the Gospel now.” It starts with them saying, “Jesus, is now the time that you’re going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” If I can be speculative, I think the heart behind this question is, “Jesus, is now the time you’re going to be in charge and we’re going to look normal again? Is now the time we’re going to have our families stop saying to us, ‘Who are you following again? Why did you leave your job? Why is everyone mad at you all the time?’ Jesus, is now the time we can look like we were right? Is now the time that all that we’ve been doing can be vindicated? Jesus, is now the time that you are going to be in charge and everything is going to be as it should be?”

What is Jesus’ response? “The Holy Spirit is coming. Tell people exactly what has happened to you.” And then he floats away. I just love this moment. Jesus is saying, “You want it to be done. I know you want it to be done. I’m sorry you want it to be done, but we are just getting started here. Instead of you having a border and a wall, and starting to build something, it’s time to go out again. It’s time to go out again, and I’m going to be with you. In fact, the very Spirit of God is going to be inside of you, motivating you, driving you, backing up the things you’re doing, and all I’m asking is that you tell people what you’ve seen. But you’ve got to go.”

We know they do go, but I love this moment of insight into the disciples. “Is it time for me to look normal?” And Jesus saying no, but really good stuff is going to happen.

When I think about where this goes in Acts, I love the way this goes. They go forward and it looks so much like Jesus’ ministry. They are reliant on the people they are reaching out to. They are meeting around tables, eating together. They are taking risks. They are seeing God move. They are having some pretty hard moments, but the thing goes forward one house at a time, one conversation at a time, one meal at a time until somehow it made it here. The Great Commission was lived out and that is something I am deeply thankful for.

But we also have this reality in our lives. Most of us are not eleven people who have left their jobs and are willing to be sent anywhere, especially with the nudging of the Holy Spirit. Most of us who are here today are in our lives. We’re in our space. We’re all really, really busy. We’re not going to Samaria. We’re not going to the ends of the earth. We’re here. So how does the Great Commission apply to us? How does this invitation to go and make Jesus known apply to us? Isn’t that just something that gets outsourced to other people? Professional people? Bold people? Loud people? Annoying people? Street corner people who yell at us? I don’t think it is. I think that we start with where we are. We start with the people around us. We start with the relationships that we have. Permit me to share a couple of stories.

When I was in college, I actually converted. I’m a product of very active, intentional evangelism. But, I had relationships that pre-dated my conversion. I had friends that predated my conversion. For the first two years of my Christian life, I was pretty bold. I was doing Bible studies. I was handing out flyers. I was inviting people to things. I was pretty bold with my faith. The one group that never heard anything about my faith was

the friends that I had before I was a Christian. That group was off-limits for me to ever talk to about what I did or what I was about. Primarily this was because they knew me too well. It was awkward to talk about Jesus with the same people who had seen me do some very, very embarrassing things that are not so Jesus-like. Then in my junior year I started having this sense of conviction, this idea that it was very hypocritical to be all about strangers, to be all about going to the ends of the earth. I went to China on a mission trip. But not being able to talk to my closest friends felt odd. So I initiated with two of my friends.

My first friend was Nick. Nick grew up in a Christian home, but like many college students, he wasn't too interested in his faith while he was in school. He had started to express to me that not only was he disinterested, he was beginning to doubt whether God existed, and if God did exist, how he could possibly be good given the nature of the world and the nature of a lot of teachings of Jesus. So Nick and I had some conversations back and forth. I finally said, "Nick I think you just need to have an experience with God so that God can show you he's real, because that seems to be the undergirding of everything. You just doubt the possibility of any of this."

He thought it was a good idea. It was the end of the school year, so I committed to pray for him every day for the whole summer that God would reveal himself to Nick, and then ask him in the fall what happened. So off we went. That summer I prayed for Nick every day. Sometimes with yearning in the depth of my heart for my friend who I loved, and sometimes right before I fell asleep because I forgot all day. Over the course of the summer I got excited. I knew God had done *something*. I didn't have a cell phone then, so I didn't know what God had done, but he had done *something*.

So at the start of the semester, I met with Nick for coffee. I said, "Nick, what happened?"

Nick goes, "What happened with what?"

"I was praying for you this summer. What happened?"

Nick said, "You were praying for me this summer?" He totally forgot the conversation that we had had. He goes, "Nothing happened."

"Nothing? But I prayed every day. Nick, are you sure nothing happened?"

Well, one thing happened. He proceeded to tell me this story. His dad had roped him into driving some kids home from a church event and he had this big SUV. He swerved to avoid something and his car flipped over three or four times with all the kids in it. I asked him if anyone got hurt, and he said no one got hurt except one kid sprained his pinky. Otherwise everyone was fine.

I'm like, "Nick! That was God! He came through. He revealed himself to you."

And Nick said, “No, it was a car accident.” So we went back and forth about it.

“That’s what we were praying for!”

“No, God doesn’t wreck cars.”

“You don’t even believe in God. How do you know what God does?”

We argued back and forth and he never changed his mind. And that’s my story of my friend Nick.

Then there’s my friend Aaron. Aaron grew up in a completely unreligious household. There was not hostility to religion. Religion just didn’t matter enough to have a conversation about it in Aaron’s home. So in college, Aaron and I had a lot of conversation about what I would call the technology of faith. What do you do when you go to a church service? How do you pray? Do you go down on your knees? Do you put your hands together? What is a Bible? These are the kinds of conversations I had with Aaron. Around my senior year, I realized that these were not the conversations that were going to help him to know Jesus. How church works from an anthropological perspective is not really the right way to do it. So I said, “Aaron, would you study the Bible with me for five weeks?”

He said, “Yeah, that would be awesome.”

So Aaron and I met for five weeks. We studied the miracles of Jesus and we had good conversations. In-depth conversations. Conversations about our families. Conversations about what we longed for the most. It was great, especially since our conversations were not nearly at that level before. They were based in pro wrestling and sports. All of a sudden we were talking about real stuff.

At the end of that time, I said, “Aaron, do you feel like you are any closer? Do you feel like you have any interest in Jesus?”

He said, “No, I learned all I need to learn. Not interested.”

You might find these to be strange stories to share in an evangelism talk. They are not all that inspiring, but they are the stories I wanted to share because here’s the punch line. Nick, Aaron, and I are still friends. We are all still friends. When I was trying to decide whether I should include them in my sermon, they both reached out to me for very random reasons on Facebook this week. Nick wanted to discuss misogyny in mid-90s movies, and Aaron had questions on a podcast. They just reached out to me, and I realized something. My fear about evangelism, and I’m guessing some of your heebie jeebies about evangelism, is not that it’s going to go too well. It’s not that too many of our friends are going to decide to join our church. Our fears are that by the very nature of bringing it up, by breaking through the glass barrier and talking about our faith, talking about what we do on Sundays, talking about the decisions we make,

talking about how Jesus intersects with our lives, that our friends are going to be offended. They might feel like we're pushing something on them, that we think they're inadequate, that we don't love them the way that they are. These stories remind me that is not the case.

I'm not going to say it's never the case. Things can go wrong. People get offended by a lot of stuff. But in the vast majority of instances, I think most of the time when I talk to my friends about my faith, they see it as an opportunity to know me more. It's an opportunity to have a deeper relationship with me. It's an opportunity to see more vulnerably the things that matter. And they have been receptive. Sometimes they have decided to follow Jesus. That's happened, too. But most of the time it's in this area like it is with Nick and Aaron. It just goes well, our friendship gets a little bit better, and they know I'm there if they have questions in the future.

I think sermons need to leave you with something to do at the end of them. I'm into labs and theory when it comes to sermons. I have a couple of challenges for us, pulled from the scripture and from these stories. The first one is this: Pray for your friends. I love my story with Nick because I was so earnest. I just believed that if I prayed every day a magical switch was going to happen and Nick was going to love Jesus. Maybe it didn't work that way. To this day I have no idea whether God flipped Nick's car and protected Nick and all those kids. I don't know. But what I do know is that by praying for my friend every day I actually became more intimately connected to my friend. I loved him more. My heart for him changed. He wasn't just a person in my life that I was scared to let know what I did when I went to church on Sunday morning. He became someone who I cared about more, and more deeply.

My challenge for you is to pick one or two people in your life and just pray for them every single day. Pray for God's blessing to be on them. Pray that you would understand them more. Pray for opportunities to have deeper levels of conversation. Pray for deeper intersection in your life and theirs. Pray for that person, for those people, every single day. Allow God, through prayer, to more intimately entwine you together because I think that's what happens when we choose to endure in praying for people consistently.

My second challenge, I'm going to call expanding your living room. What I realized with my friends Nick and Aaron, and what I realize today when I look at my life, is that my temptation is to take my life and keep it relatively close in. I will reach out to a million people. I know, at this point, a hundred high school students. I know them, interact with them, and have short conversations with them. But the people who are really in my life, really in my living room? My temptation is to keep that pretty small, and if I'm going to let someone in I tend to want to make it all look good. You can come into my living room when I've vacuumed. You can come over to my house for dinner when I make my best dish (which, by the way, is Margherita pizza).

If I make my living room bigger, it means more people are going to come in and it means it's not always going to look as good. I think if I'm going to live out my sermon,

my standards have to go from 'you can come over when my place looks good' to 'you can come over as long as I've got clothes on my kids.' We have to just get to the point where we're letting people into our actual homes, but also into our lives when they're not all put together, when they're not perfect, and when we haven't shaped it to look a certain way.

When we're thinking about evangelism, thinking about living out the call, one of the objections people have about Christians is never that they are too transparent. It's never that they're too honest. It's never that they're too willing to be vulnerable. It's usually that they act too perfect. They look like they have it all together. They want to have all the answers. I lean back into that invitation from Jesus. Let the Holy Spirit initiate conversations and just say what you know. Say what you've experienced. Be a witness.

I think as we expand our living rooms and let people into our actual lives, into our messy lives, into our imperfect lives, into our busy lives, we reveal Jesus not in the perfectly formed, perfectly thought-out, perfectly articulated message, but we reveal Jesus as he's revealed in our actual lives. In that transparency and in that honesty, I think the message of Jesus comes across more clearly.

Again, to go back to Nick and Aaron, I kept waiting for some Christian who I didn't have baggage with to talk to them about faith. Then I realized that it was my baggage with my friends that made me the right person to initiate with them. The fact that they knew me is what made me the right person.

Those are my challenges to you. I'll articulate them again.

Pray for your friends—pick a couple and do it every day.

Invite people into your physical home, to the extended living room of Wednesday Supper Fellowship, to coffee, to your morning run, or to play dates with your kids. Invite more people into your life. Invite more people into your lived experience, and just be a witness to what you know. Just say what has happened in your life. Say how God has been revealed to you when it's the right time, the right opportunity, and when the Spirit moves you. Amen.