

WGUMC May 6, 2018 “Christ in 140 Characters”  
Acts 10:34-48

My mom used to tell me a story about my Aunt Betty. She had a beautiful singing voice and was once asked to sing “The Lord’s Prayer” at a funeral. But she got nervous and forgot the words. Sounds like a pastor’s anxiety dream.

What about this one: When my dad got to midlife, he took a Bible study course at church and one night came home with the idea that we ditch the old “God is great, God is good...” prayer on Sundays and each take a turn blessing the meal. The first Sunday, Dad led the prayer and that was fine. The next week, it was Mom’s turn. But she was not one to pray out loud, and you could hear extreme discomfort in her voice. With each phrase of the prayer, her voice jumped several pitches until she got to the “Amen,” sounding like a chipmunk. Of course her family was very supportive. We all broke out laughing, and she never led family prayer again.

Many of us probably fear that a similar scene would unfold if we were ever to try to witness to our faith. I wonder if the Apostle

Peter ever felt the same way. After all, he was a fisherman, probably illiterate, certainly not trained to be a public speaker. In fact, he had a reputation for saying stupid things and putting his foot in his mouth. But there he was in the house of Cornelius, a Roman officer.

Some background: Cornelius was a devout man and while praying to God saw a vision and in that vision, angels, who told him about a certain Simon in the city of Joppa. So he sent two slaves and a soldier to find this Simon, aka Peter. Meanwhile, Peter had been praying and he saw a vision and heard a voice from God telling him to eat unkosher food because what God had called clean, he must not call profane.

While Peter was trying to figure out what to make of his vision, Cornelius' men appeared. They were not Jews. They were Gentiles. They were "unclean." Now Peter understood his dream. God was telling him to go with them to meet Cornelius, a Gentile, a Roman, in the same army as the soldiers who had crucified Jesus. He had to

have been wondering, what did Cornelius want? And if he asked Peter to talk about Jesus, what was he going to say?

If someone were to ask you to tell them about Jesus, what would you say? The letter of 1 Peter says, “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you.” [1 Peter 3:15] So, I have to ask you, how would you spell out the hope that is in you?

In other words, if the occasion arose, if you encountered someone who wanted to know what you know about Jesus, could you tell them? It doesn't need to be long and complicated. Just an elevator speech. Peter's account to the household of Cornelius was very brief. Not as short as a tweet. Not 140 characters, but not much more than 140 words. Just so you know, my average sermon has over 1500 words. Peter's sermon was simple. He told them three things: 1. Who Jesus is—the Lord; 2. What Jesus did—went about doing good, died and then rose again; 3. What difference it makes—everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins.

But even before he got out all 140-plus words, the Holy Spirit came down on everyone in that room. The Jews who came with Peter were astounded that the Spirit had been poured out EVEN on the Gentiles. Now, let's be honest, how many sermons have we heard in our lifetime? How many times have we come to church and the Holy Spirit did not come down for us? Why not? What was missing? What did Cornelius and his household have that we don't have?

Cornelius had an open mind and an open heart. He sent for Peter because he wanted to hear what Peter had to say. He was willing to get woke, as they say. He was willing to take the risk that what Peter said would change his way of thinking. And he knew that if his thoughts changed, then his heart would change and if his heart changed, his whole life would change.

We are not so open to change. Just ask the pastor who is resisting The Change with every fiber of her being. I'm afraid that we often resist the change that the Holy Spirit is trying to work in us.

We close up, clamp down and choke off the new birth that the Spirit is trying to stir in us. If we could, we'd push that baby right back up the birth canal!

The reason that Peter's testimony was so powerful was not because he was so eloquent, not because he was so persuasive. Peter's sermon was successful because Cornelius was so receptive. I can attest to the fact that when you have a willing audience, witnessing is easy. When a person comes to you with an open heart it's a whole lot easier to pour God's love into it.

I saw it last Sunday when Linda Yepiz and I went to see one of the Village House women who had gone into another program. When she was at Woodhaven, she was spiraling down and got to the point where she was too unstable to stay with us. We had to do what none of us want to do. We had to tell her she to leave. Linda stayed with her over the next 24 hours, while she hit rock bottom and finally admitted to herself and to Linda that she needed help. Then she got some help.

It's been over two months now, and we wanted to check in. She's looking good and sounding even better. As we were sitting at a coffee shop downtown, she said to us, "You guys saved my life." No, God did. When this woman realized how empty she was, she opened her heart and the Holy Spirit poured right in.

Now that doesn't happen every day. But you have more chances to share Jesus with people than you think you do, and you probably have more opportunities to witness to people who don't know Jesus than I do. That's because you work with people who think Jesus is a joke. You live in neighborhoods where any talk of salvation is suspicious. You go to school where having a faith commitment is decidedly uncool.

But then you happen upon someone or someone happens to come to you in a crisis. Their strength and hope are gone, and they reach out to you for help because you seem like you have something that holds you together. You may not feel it all the time, but you have an aura about you, you have a spirit in you that other people

can see and feel. And they are desperately hoping that you will share with them whatever that something is.

Paul in Romans says that that something is God's love that has been poured into your heart through the Holy Spirit that has been given to you. [Rom 5:5] And now that their hearts are broken open, all you have to do is pour the love of Christ in.

So what's your elevator speech? You can convey Christ in 140 characters. Brian tweets this: "The world, once whole, then broken. Jesus came, suffered, died, lives. Yahweh's creation restored. Spirit alive in us, in spite of us. Life!" I gave it a shot: "Great world God made we messed up. God in Jesus to heal and save. Died now lives. Love wins. In the end everything is beautiful again."

That probably won't bring the Holy Spirit down for anyone, even if we double the characters. But the only character that God really needs to bring Jesus to someone else is you. Each one of you is a character! And remember, you don't need any words at all to communicate the love of Christ, to save someone's life. When your

heart is open, when you stop resisting, the Holy Spirit will not only come to you but will pass through you. Your life could very well be the only Bible that someone else reads.

With that hope we begin a conversation about how we are going to share Christ in Willow Glen. The church is changing. The culture is changing. The mission field is challenging. So one of the first things our team is going to do is what Peter did when he went to the house of Cornelius. We are going to come to you and to others whose hearts might be open to what the Spirit is trying to do. But instead of preaching at you, we want to listen to you. We want to know: how's it going with you? What is going on in your life? What do you need? What does your heart long for?

This church is here because many years ago hearts were open and the Holy Spirit poured herself out even on the Gentiles in Willow Glen. Astonishing! What's more: she will do it again. And I promise you that hearts will be healed and lives will be saved here and now just as they were in Judea and Jerusalem.