

Sermon Notes – June 17, 2018
“Faith Sharing”
Brian Walton

During the advent season following my granddaughter’s third birthday I was visiting at her home. My son and his wife had decorated for the holidays. Lights were placed outside their house; the tree was up and decorated; and there were even a couple of presents set out to tease and excite. What I didn’t notice anywhere was a reference to the story that is foundational to Christmas. There was no advent calendar, no manger scene, no story books describing the nativity. I asked my son if I could purchase the family a creche and he readily agreed. I went to Ten Thousand Villages and bought a small creche with stuffed doll-like figures representing Mary and Joseph, the baby and the shepherds and a couple of sheep.



My son welcomed the gift and suggested that I should explain the manger scene to my granddaughter. I did my best to share the story of Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus. I found out later that my granddaughter had been

intrigued by the story but in her three-year old mind she had concluded that the name of the infant was “Baby G”. It impressed her enough that when she was visiting her other grandparents in Phoenix this past Christmas she saw a larger creche in someone’s yard and exclaimed with excitement, “Hey look, its Baby G!”

Last weekend I was visiting in Calgary and my four-year-old grandson, a consumer of all things intriguing, showed interest in the Hawaiian volcano. The CBC news app on my phone contained a series of short videos about the eruption.

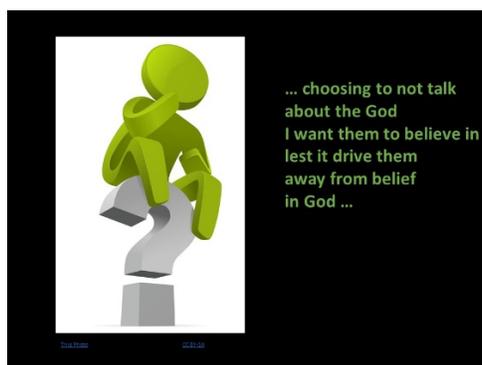


We sat down to look at the display together. In one video, an indigenous elder was chanting near the volcano. “Why is that man singing?” my grandson asked. Without much thought I replied that he was singing to the God of the Volcano. Without missing a beat, my grandson inquired, “What’s God?” My mind raced and I concluded - for the moment - that God was the “Power” inside the volcano.

On our drive home from Calgary I found myself growing morose over the realization that my children are not likely going to introduce my grandkids to the God that has shaped so much of my life. Don’t get me

wrong – my kids are not unbelievers. I think they have a positive curiosity about things spiritual and a nostalgic appreciation for the church of their childhood. It's just that the world has marginalized matters of faith and my kids, like so many others, have accepted that church is on the margins of life. After I shared my thoughts aloud, my wise partner of 43 years grew quiet for a few kilometres. I assumed that she was thinking, "why does he worry himself about these things," but when she finally spoke Victoria asked two very important questions. First, "why don't **you** tell them about God" and, second, "what would you say to a four-year-old about God"?

They were both good questions. I recalled my daughter-in-law once saying to me "we're leaving it up to you to teach the kids about God." "Up to me" - the idea kind of panicked me. I know it seems strange that a preacher who has talked unashamedly about God to thousands of people, gets tongue-tied when talking about God to his own family. I confess that outside the confines of this church community I don't talk to people about God. Why is this I wondered? In part, it is because I'm an introvert and not likely to start up conversations about personal matters with strangers – but my grandkids aren't strangers. In part, I've seen too many people pushed away from God by overly-enthusiastic evangelists and I don't want to risk estranging the latent beliefs of my kids or grandkids.



I note the irony in what I said: I choose to not talk about the God I want them to believe in lest it drives them away from belief in God. Clearly faith-sharing is a complicated matter for those of us in the United Church.

Of course, there is Victoria's other question – what would you say to a four-year-old about God. That question seems easier. The mind of a child will readily understand that God is like a parent - someone you might call 'Papa' or Abba as Jesus did. God is like a parent that is always near to you, and although you may not see God, God is always there to listen. God is like a best friend who wants to go with you everywhere and who will always love you. The life of Jesus places God in our midst and provides all kinds of stories about love and care, about right and wrong, with which a child can easily identify. My hesitancy is not so much 'what' to share but how to cross the bridge from quiet reservation to faith sharing.

When I think about telling a similar story to adults, to strangers I meet at the coffee shop, or even to my friends, the question circles around – why don't **you** tell them about God? I turned to 'Google' and discovered many sites with recommendations on how to share your faith. This one (on the screen) gave the top ten tips for evangelizing others.

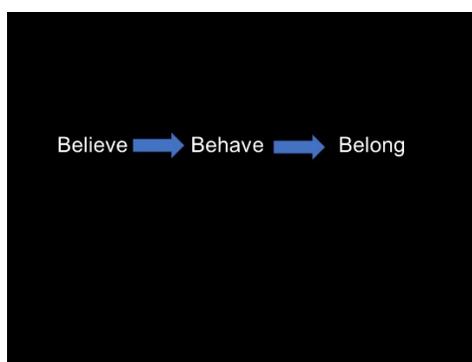
1. Recognize how God works in your life.
2. Don't let assumptions about others keep you from sharing.
3. Trust you have something valuable to share.
4. Write out your faith story in advance
5. Practice it out loud. (aim for 3 minutes)
6. Let God direct you to someone willing to listen.
7. Ask permission to share your story.
8. Take time to listen to the questions of the other person.

9. Pray for the listener.

10. Trust God.

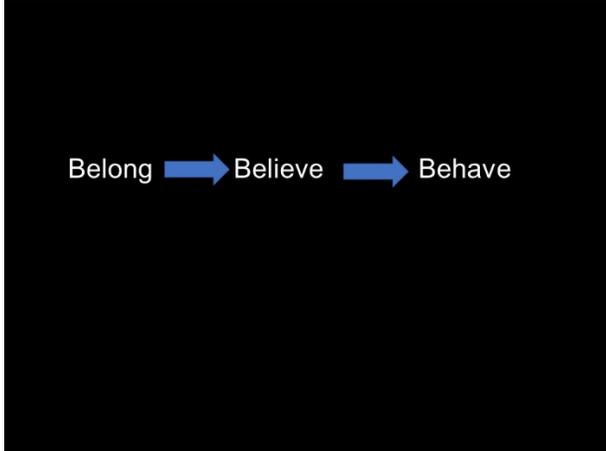
It is a reasonable set of ideas yet it reminds me of a 'sales manual' with a spiritual overlay.

Those who study these things say that 50 years ago people who came to church followed a pattern –



People were expected to adopt a set of beliefs, behave according to a certain moral code and then they could (truly) belong to the church (and reap the benefits of an approving society). The United Church assumed faith-sharing was unnecessary for the implication was that to be a full member of society implied involvement in church.

Fast forward to the twenty-first century and the pattern has changed significantly. No one connects participation in a church to social status. Researches now describe the pattern as



Belong → Believe → Behave

confirming what the Spiritual Conversations Group told me last fall. Namely that the first reason most of them attend St. Martin's is for the sense of community. It is followed by a "feeling of faith", certainly not a set of dogmatic beliefs and that combination of being in a community which recognizes the mystery of life leads to behaviours shaped by the maxim to love God, love neighbour and love self.

Ultimately that is what I want my grandchildren to know – to know that there is a source of Love in the world and that that love is embodied in their parents and grandparents, their siblings and friends and in a little band of like-minded believers who are convinced that this love can turn isolation into community, poverty into equality, racism into acceptance and personal angst into self-affirming hope.

A couple of years ago I was invited to visit a friend in the States. He, in turn took me to visit his friend – a Saskatchewan man who had become a highly successful entrepreneur, who spent months in the southern states and commuted by way of his private jet. Unfortunately, our conversation turned to the activities of former President Obama, and Obama's enhancement of medicare and his welcome to refugee. My

friend's friend was highly critical of these actions and, as the guest, I chose to remain quiet until he called me out. From my place of self-imposed silence, he demanded, "What do you think?" Cornered, I confessed that my God taught me to believe that it is my responsibility to care for my neighbour in need whether they be down the street and in need of medical treatment, or cowering in a war-torn county in need of safe-haven. My friend's friend looked at me, shrugged his shoulders and concluded, "Well, I don't care about them."

It is a long way from explaining the characters in the manger to following God's radical command to love neighbour but the journey must start somewhere.

I thought this morning's scripture was simply Mark's variation on the parable of the sower but it is so much more.



I came across a Greek scholar who explained that the Greek word to scatter actually implies a random, almost accidental act. That the one who scatters doesn't actually know they are doing it with the result that when the seeds blossom the sower is surprised.

In light of this understanding the parable might read:

A man went out and bought a creche, and talked about the power of God in a mountain, and became determined to speak about Jesus as a friend. And as he randomly and awkwardly seeded stories about the power of Love it spread into his grandkids, and to his friends, and to the person in line at the coffee shop. And the man was surprised when from his awkward attempts they captured the vision of radical of love and chose to live it in the world.

This morning's parable implies that it is my task to throw the seeds of God's love far and wide. Then I must trust in God, that a new generation will embrace this power of Love and live it into the world. Might it be so.

Amen.