

JUST WALK ACROSS THE ROOM

(3) THE POWER OF STORY

1 Peter 3:15-16

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(with material from Bill Hybels, used by permission)

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SCRIPTURE

¹⁵ You must worship Christ as Lord of your life. And if someone asks about your hope as a believer, always be ready to explain it. ¹⁶ But do this in a gentle and respectful way. Keep your conscience clear. Then if people speak against you, they will be ashamed when they see what a good life you live because you belong to Christ. (1 Peter 3:15-16 NLT).

INTRODUCTION

[++ PPT Slide 1/Just Walk campaign graphic, Week Three ++]

I invite you now to participate in a little game of word association. I say a word and you respond with whatever pops into your head. Your response can be anything, remember ... anything that comes to mind. But the key is to go fast. You can't give this a lot of thought. The idea is to capture your gut-instinct immediately after you hear what comes out of my mouth. And say your answer aloud – nice and loud.

The first word is. . .MONA.

[++ PPT Slide 2/Mona++]

[++NOTE: If the response is anemic I will repeat MONA. ++]

DIET

[++ PPT Slide 3/Diet++]

SHELDON

[++ PPT Slide 4/Sheldon++]

I was expecting to hear more “Coopers.” Don’t you watch Bing Bang Theory?

[++ PPT Slide 5/Big Bang Theory Cast++]

Next word is. . .BROCCOLI

[++ PPT Slide 6/Broccoli++]

WINTER

[++ PPT Slide 7/Winter++]

KITTENS

[++ PPT Slide 8/Kittens++]

CHRISTIAN

[++ PPT Slide 9/Christian++]

Lots of different responses to that word. What kind of answers do you suppose we'd get if I did this with a group of people who didn't go to church? Or if I were to simply ask such a group, "'Do you know any Christians? If so, what are they like ... what are your general impressions of them?'"

We might get quite an earful? What if their perceptions included things like these:

"I've come across a few Christians, and the ones I know are ... hmmm, how do I describe them ... they're just so ... uptight ... narrow ... and rigid."

Or ...

"I don't know any of them very well. They hang with their own type ... certainly don't rub shoulders with people like me."

Or what about ...

"I know a Christian ... a real born-again type. . .what a turn-off she is! I feel judged if I even inhale wrong. She's so self-righteous, haughty ... just absolutely egotistical."

These are some of the perceptions that are out there. We could just complain about the unfairness of these perceptions or we could figure out a way to reverse the trends ... to

give the watching world something good to say about Christ-followers!

Why? Because God's heart beats for pointing people to faith, remember? And while you and I are here on earth, we get to serve as his vehicle for getting that done!

Here's what I wish. I wish that whenever I struck up a casual conversation with people and asked them to tell me what they think of the Christ-followers they know, the first thought that would come to mind would be something like, "Hmmm ... Christians? The ones I know are chock full of integrity. That's what distinguishes them their integrity ... and their moral courage."

Or ...

"Christians? The ones I've come across are ridiculously filled with compassion. They're just plain kind to people!"

Or ...

"Christians? They're humble people, they're honest ... they have this incredible inner strength."

"Christians? They are radically inclusive of people, regardless of their background, their preferences, their lifestyle choices, you name it. It's amazing!"

"Christians? They're always taking walks across rooms. Whenever somebody needs a little encouragement or friendship, Christians are the first ones to make the move."

[++ PPT Slide 10/Just Walk campaign graphic, Week Three (second appearance of slide)++]

Wouldn't it be great if that was the type of press we were getting!

POINT 1: STORIES ARE POWERFUL!

[++ PPT Slide 11/Point 1: Stories are powerful ++]

The power of story – and of words – is undeniable throughout the Bible. Consider the following:

- Ecclesiastes 6:11 says that when used sparsely ... succinctly ... words carry great meaning.

- Psalm 119:130 says that words can actually give light. Words can give understanding to those who don't yet understand.
- Proverbs 12:18 says that although reckless words pierce like a sword, words from the tongue of the wise can actually bring healing!
- Proverbs 16:24 says that pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.
- Ecclesiastes 10:12 says that although a fool is consumed by his own lips, the words from a wise person's mouth are ... gracious.

Words. Humble words. Healing words. Wise words. Gentle words. Grace-filled words.

I wonder, are these the types of words you're known for speaking? If your closest friends or family members were polled anonymously about this, would they say that in the course of normal, everyday life, you can be counted on to speak words of encouragement and grace?

Let's take this morning as an example. Think about the very last thing you said before you walked into the sanctuary. Do you remember who you were talking to? Do you remember what you said? Were the words you spoke life-giving and grace-filled? Or were they, well ... not?

It seems to me that if we could find a way to use words for good in people's lives – if we could be known for being clear and humble and succinct and relevant – then we might just frustrate the heck out of a few of those awful perceptions that exist about Christians.

You be your own judge, but in my opinion, there are two primary areas where effective words could dramatically improve perceptions about Christ-followers:

- The first area revolves around how we talk about God
- The second revolves around how we talk about our personal experience with God

What is God's story? What is your story? And how can you get them both told well? So well that your listeners walk away saying, "Now that I understood! That I enjoyed! That I want in my own life!")

POINT 2: GOD HAS A STORY. LEARN TO TELL IT WELL!

[++ PPT Slide 12/Point 2: God has a story ... learn to tell it well! ++]

Last week, we discovered that after you decide to take a walk across a room, it's

important to focus on developing a friendship instead of saying your piece. It's really important to discover the other person's story instead of wedging your own agenda into the conversation. And it's absolutely critical to listen for the Spirit's guidance about appropriate next steps you might take to meet a need or two of the person you're talking with.

I believe that if you are faithful at doing this, sooner or later God is going to give you an opportunity to say a word for him or tell someone why you started walking with God to begin with.

God has a story. A powerful story. And your job – and mine – is to learn to tell it well.

If someone in your current sphere of influence were to come to you today and say this: "You know, Leslie (assuming your name is Leslie), we've been friends for a long time. And you've been really cool not to force your God-thing on me, even though you probably knew my life would be better if I'd give all that a chance. Well, anyway, things have ... I've been thinking about maybe trying out church ... the God plan, you know. But before I dive into anything huge ... I just wonder if you could sort of explain the whole deal to me.

That is what we call, in sophisticated theological terms, a wide-open door. Some of you may be a little frightened about the prospect of such an open door. If your shoulders aren't loosening, your sweaty palms aren't drying up, please know that help is on the way.

There's a tried-and-true way of explaining God's story that you might consider committing to memory, if you haven't done so already. It's called "The Bridge" – many of you may be familiar with it. The Bridge is quite simple, really, but it is a powerful way to illustrate precisely what God – and his Son, Jesus Christ – did for humankind.

The next time you find yourself in a delicate conversation where the person you're talking to really does want to understand who God is and what he has done, grab a piece of scratch paper, a napkin or whatever, and ask their permission to sketch out this bridge illustration.

{++ PPT Slide 13/Bridge illustration part a) ++}

All right, for starters, we have to establish the reality of two beings: people and God. Between people and God is a great chasm – a division that exists because of people's propensity to rebel against God's way and go their own way instead. The Bible calls this "sin."

The dilemma people face is that we want to get to God but know we can't just leap over the chasm. So we try exerting human effort, hoping we can get the bridge built.

[++ PPT Slide 14/Bridge illustration part b) ++]

In the end, we realize that all the human effort in the world will never be enough to get us to the other side. But thankfully, God sympathized with our dilemma. And because he loved us so much, he intervened so that we would have a means of getting close to him. His solution was to choose his Son, Jesus, to serve as the bridge.

[++ PPT Slide 15/Bridge illustration part c)++]

If you remember nothing else about the bridge illustration, remember this: Christ came to earth to be our bridge, and whoever makes the decision to cross the bridge will live with God forever.

[++ PPT Slide 16/John 5:24 text (overlay on Bridge illustration part d) ++]

The apostle John put it this way:

"I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life" (John 5:24 NIV).

You may choose to commit a different illustration to mind. But please make sure you have one – a clear explanation of who God is and what he has done – so that when the time comes that someone sitting across from you poses the question, you're ready to give a thoughtful answer. As our Scripture says:

“And if someone asks about your hope as a believer, always be ready to explain it” (1 Pet 3:15)

Whatever illustration you use, keep in mind the types of words we looked at earlier. Humble words. Healing words. Wise words. Gentle words. Grace-filled words. Let your speech be well-seasoned with these things.

Remember, you are not responsible for transforming a human heart ... that is the role of the Holy Spirit. Your role, when prompted to do so, is to open your mouth and give a tender, thoughtful, clear, and passionate understanding of who God is, of what he's done

for each person who ever has or ever will walk the planet.

POINT 3: YOU HAVE A STORY. LEARN TO TELL IT WELL!

[++ PPT Slide 17/Point 2: YOU have a story ... learn to tell it well! ++]

Not only does God have a story, which is what we just looked at. But you have a story as well. A powerful story. And your job is to learn to tell it well!

If you have come into relationship with God through his Son, Jesus Christ, then you have a wonderful, redemptive story to tell. Regardless of how old you were when you came to faith, hopefully you were different before Christ than you are after Christ invaded your world and beautifully wrecked it with things like grace and mercy and love.

Take the guy from Luke 5 who once had leprosy. In The Message version, the text says:

"One day in one of the villages there was a man covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus he fell down before him in prayer and said, 'If you want to, you can cleanse me.' Jesus put out his hand, touched him, and said, 'I want to. Be clean.'" Then and there the guy's skin was smooth, the leprosy gone (Luke 5:12-13 MSG).

Can you imagine what that experience must have been like for that man? What do you think he told every, single person who would listen from that point forward?! "I was a leper. But then I met Christ! And now I'm healed ... totally and completely healed."

His self-talk was probably fascinating in the hours following Christ's act of healing. "This is unbelievable! Just moments ago, my skin was so angry that it was literally ... erupting. But now look at it! It's clean. It's smooth. It's healed! Everything about me was rotting, moldy, diseased ... but I've been recreated. It's as if I were never sick! This is unreal. Where did my hopelessness go? My helplessness? They vanished with my sores. They're not here anymore. Jesus fixed all of that. I have hope! I want to live! I finally feel ... whole."

Do you see a before-and-after here?

- I was sick. But now I'm well.
- I was diseased. But now I'm healthy.
- I was outcast. But now I'm accepted.
- I was defiled ... tainted. But now I'm good as new.
- I was tarnished. But now I'm clean.

- I was left for dead. But now I have ... a future.

Who knows which aspect of the former-leper's before-and-after was most compelling to him ... who knows which facet he would have homed in on? He'd have to figure out his story for himself, right?

But here's the point: for the vast majority of you sitting in this room, the same pattern is true for you. You also have a before ...

[++PPT Slide 18/"Before" header++]
... and an after.

PPT Slide 19/"After" header (builds on previous slide)

And that's about all people need to hear right out of the blocks ... what you were like before you came to Christ. What the experience was like of embracing faith in him. And what you are like after that decision.

You'll come across some great examples of well-told faith stories in your reading of *Just Walk Across the Room*, but let me just give you the "essence" of a few helpful before-and-afters.

[++ PPT Slide 20/Before-and-after examples (build on previous slide ad advances automatically) ++]

"I was striving ... but now I'm at peace."
"I was self-destructive ... but now I'm healthy."
"Guilty, but now liberated."
"Fear-stricken, but now confident."
"Despairing, but now hopeful!"

Your own before-and-after doesn't have to be more complicated than this. It just has to be simple, humble, succinct ... and true.

I must tell you, though, that it is possible for these stories we're talking about to derail.

[++ PPT Slide 21/ Stories can derail ++]

First, faith stories derail when a Christ-follower just won't stop talking. He oversupplies and just slaughters the demand. He goes on and on and on ... and even after the listener

sends all sorts of warning signals that disinterest and disdain have taken root, the storyteller obliviously keeps chatting away.

Second, faith stories derail when a Christ-follower is fuzzy about the story's core theme. She gets all tangled up in a dozen story lines and leaves her listener frustrated, exhausted, and baffled.

[++ PPT Slide 22/ Avoid Christianese ++]

Third, faith stories derail when a Christ-follower lays out a string of four-syllable Christian-insider words that no one outside the family of faith can understand. Well, here, have a listen for yourself ...

[++ Show excerpt from Just Walk Across the Room Four-Week Experience DVD
CLIP: Message Video Excerpt, Week 3, part 1
(run-time :25) ++]

[++NOTE: This clip will automatically freeze on the "religionese" woman's face and a "Continue" button will appear so it can be started again for the next clip. ++]

Fourth-and finally – faith stories derail when ... please hear me on this ... your faith story will derail, blow up, and leave a trail of smoke a mile long if you play the superiority card. If you act like you have your act perfectly together and the listener is somehow inferior to you, you're headed for the ditch ... and fast.

[++ press "Continue" button on current freeze-frame to play next clip.
Show excerpt from Just Walk Across the Room Four-Week Experience DVD
CLIP: Message Video Excerpt, Week 3, part 2
(run-time TBD) ++]

Please, don't ever let that posture be true of you. If it's ever true of me, I hereby give you all permission to whack me with a wet noodle.

CLOSING

[++ PPT Slide 23/Let's Hear Your Story title slide ++]

As we have already heard, the Bible tells us in 1 Peter:

If someone asks about your hope as a believer, always be ready to explain it

(1 Peter 3:15 NLT).

Okay, so here's what I want to encourage you to do this week: Write out your faith stories – your individual before-and-after faith story. Create your hundred-words-or-less story written in a clear, succinct, humble, and simple manner. Read chapter 6 of *Just Walk Across the Room* if you need help. Maybe ask a trusted friend or family member to give a friendly critique. Have an open heart toward a little constructive criticism.

[++ PPT Slide 24/Let's Hear Your Story activity explanation ++]

Once you are satisfied you have completed your story, please consider sending me a copy. By sending me a copy you are also giving permission to publish the story. I am hoping we can compile the stories we receive in time for the Celebration Dinner on November 19.

We may not be able to reverse all of the negative perceptions that are out there about Christians, but we can certainly do our part to ensure that as far as this congregation is concerned, we have our act together on the story front. We can do our part to cause this community to say, "The Christians over there at First Pres? They know how to tell God's story. And to hear them talk about what he's done in their lives ... it makes me want that type of thing for my own life!"

[++PPT Slide 25/Just Walk campaign graphic, Week Three (third appearance of slide)++]

In 1 Corinthians we read:,

"If you speak in a way no can one understand, what's the point of opening your mouth?" (1 Corinthians 14:9 MSG).

Let's do the One whose name we bear proud as we work hard to hone and shape and sharpen our before-and-after stories. Stay the course until your story is ready to face the world, and then go tell it confidently as often as God provides opportunity!