

“News Too Good To Keep To Ourselves”

Acts 9:19b-25

(third of four)

Ninth Sunday Morning After Pentecost, August 1, 2004

What is the best news you've ever heard? I've heard a lot of good news, but I suppose the best news I've ever heard was that Jackie was going to have Emily and then a few years later, Nicholas. We discovered that she was pregnant with Emily in the first week of November 1986. We decided not to share the news until Christmas. We would make that news part of our Christmas presents to our families. You can imagine how hard it was not to say anything, especially to our church family. Once families had been informed on Christmas Day, we told the church family on the first Sunday of the new-year. I told the congregation to join with Jackie and me in a wonderful year of grace since she was with child and that child would arrive around July 10. That same day we started telling as many people as we could. I even told the two gray cats who lived next door to us! It was news too good to keep.

Repeat with Nicholas in August 1989. After telling our families, we shared it with the church and then began sharing with as many people as possible that he would arrive somewhere around April 20, 1990. He showed up on April 18. The news of his impending and actual arrival was news too good to keep to ourselves.

When Saul met Jesus Christ, it was news too good to keep. That is verified in the text I read from Acts 9. It was such gratifying news that, as we observed last week, the Holy Spirit revealed it through a vision to Ananias, who was a significant vehicle of grace for Saul. Any time someone has a turn around moment in his or her life that results in a radical commitment to a cause, it is news worth telling, especially if the commitment is to Jesus Christ.

Paul, as he was known among the Gentiles, experienced a radical turn around moment and moved into a new commitment. That's what conversion is. It is a drastic change that results in a complete turn-around characterized by an innovative dedication to a movement for which one is willing to die. Whenever that happens to a person or even a church – churches need to be converted sometimes, they need turn around moments – it is news too good to keep to ourselves.

So what's the problem? It's a hang-up many Christians have: sharing the news. I don't think any would doubt the news being too good to keep. Yet it is kept more often than not. So maybe the news really isn't that great? “How can you say that, Jimmy?”, some of you may be thinking. I say that to get us all *to thinking*. You see, the average disciple spends very little time in communicating the news of his or her experience in Christ with others. There are many reasons why this happens.

One reason pertinent to this sermon is our deficiency in communicating a comprehension of the impact of conversion. Conversion, remember, is a turn around moment in which one changes directions with a zealous commitment to that direction. Failure to appreciate that impact results in a shallow experience in Christ and when there's not much to tell, well, it doesn't get told.

Paul's experience of conversion offers a piece of wisdom that will help one overcome the personal apathy that, unfortunately, sometimes accompanies our experience with the Lord. That apathy is verified by our keeping the news too good to keep to ourselves. If you and I will draw from the experience of this fellow from Tarsus, we'll be encouraged and better equipped to tell the news just as if we were telling the news of someone expecting a baby.

Notice the bit of wisdom. Paul relied upon the church for instruction and encouragement. Verse 19b in this text leaped right off the page as I meditated over it last week. It says he was with the disciples in Damascus for several days. Now I'm sure they were rather skeptical. Wouldn't you be? This was public enemy number one. He was on his way to Damascus to round up all believers. But their skepticism gave way to conversion. From these fellow believers Paul was instructed in the way of Christ.

He needed to be introduced to the teachings of Christ before he could set about telling the news of his own experience.

Perhaps those brothers and sisters helped him as he rehearsed what actually happened to him on his way to Damascus. Given the actuality of the depth of his own mastery of the Old Testament, Paul must have, in turn, given added instruction and encouragement to those Damascene believers since the Old Testament was the only Bible they had. He was instructed and encouraged and certainly he instructed and encouraged those who did likewise for him. Because from the start he relied upon the church for instruction and encouragement, he discovered that he was better equipped to offer news that was too good to keep to himself especially with those who were skeptics – skeptical believers, yes; skeptical non-believers, most certainly.

Do you give a significant place in your life to the church? Did you hear the word. ***“For several days Saul stayed with the Lord’s followers in Damascus.”*** In the spirit of that word in verse 19b, how much time do you spend with other pilgrims in the church, specifically Tabernacle Baptist Church? If you find yourself having reservations about sharing the news of your personal experience, if you find it easy to keep the news too good to keep to yourself, you may need to ask what your attitude is toward the church – this body of disciples at 150 Tabernacle Drive – that is the visible expression of Christ.

I realize that there is a whole lot wrong with the church today. Nobody knows that better than I. I listen to members elaborate what’s wrong with it. I listen to other pastors articulate their version of what’s wrong. I even listen to myself expound its inadequacies. Perhaps all of us would do better if we considered what’s right instead of what’s wrong all of the time.

William Willimon, a Methodist who serves as Minister to the University at Duke University, and was recently elected to the position of Bishop in the United Methodist Church in South Carolina, is a prolific writer and excellent preacher. One of his many books bears a title that is the antithesis of the way we tend to judge the church, even Tabernacle. The title? *What’s Right With the Church.* Now Willimon does not suggest we ignore what’s wrong, but he does discern the vital heart and necessity of the church.

He says, “In its very existence the church serves the world, not by running errands for the world, but by providing a light to the world, that is, by providing an imaginative alternative for society ... It is a paradigm for a society that the world considers impossible.”¹ The world is skeptical and the world needs a turn around moment.

This is why Paul was with those Christians of Damascus for several days because the more he talked and listened and the more he learned and the more he was encouraged he came to understand that the church really is the only alternative for a world society that is sick. He began to understand, with the help of those disciples, that the light, which had earlier blinded him, was the light that shined on the church – a light providing illumination for the world that considers such a community, like the church, an impossibility.

What is your attitude toward spending time with the disciples? Do you rely on the church for instruction and encouragement? Do you offer yourself as a source of instruction and encouragement? Earlier this year a couple spoke with me about all the problems they perceived to exist in this place. By the way, I’ve discovered that most people who express what they perceive to be problems in the church are really personal preferences. I asked this couple to share with me a problem and very sincerely they thought for a moment and said, “Well you don’t use the same translation of the Bible that we use. We use the New International Version and you don’t.” I responded, “That’s not a problem. That’s your personal preference. Now it’s a problem if I don’t use a Bible at all.” The couple continued. “Well, you’re too formal and stiff.” I replied, “How can you say that? I am as free-spirited as they come. The truth is I’m probably not mechanically enough at times or formal or stiff or whatever word you wish to use.” The couple then observed, “You wear a coat and tie each Sunday and we’re very casual.” I said, “That’s not a problem. That’s your personal preference. You prefer to be very casual. I prefer to wear a tie and suit. That’s my preference. It’s not a problem. Now it is a problem if I don’t wear anything!” I wasn’t trying

to be a smart aleck with that remark. I just wanted to make a point and be less “formal” and “stiff.” I don’t think they got it. Eventually they moved their membership.

Sadly, they chose not to be committed. That is the problem today in the church. Nobody wants to be committed. So you have people hopping from one church to another to get their “personal preference” tended. After a while that couple will move their membership again. That pastor or someone else will do something that will not be a problem; but, in the couple’s mind, it will be and they’ll become disenchanted and begin to view everything as a problem. And you know what? That couple might just end up back at Tabernacle.

Too often well-meaning folk lament that the church isn't doing much for them. Each of us is to ask, “What am I doing for the church?” It is one thing to ask, “What is Tabernacle doing for me?” It is quite another to ask, “What am I doing for Tabernacle?”

I sometimes wonder if going through Rick Warren’s Purpose Driven Life was of any lasting value. Most of us missed what he said from the outset. “It’s not about you. It is about God.” Yet our requests, dare I say demands, more often than not, come across as if it is about us – what we want, what we don’t want; what we like, what we don’t like. If you are skeptical about Tabernacle maybe it is because you haven’t made Tabernacle about Jesus Christ and instead, you’ve made Tabernacle about you. Some say, “We have to get our attendance up.” Let me ask you. What have you personally done about getting our attendance up? Did you invite someone to join you this morning, especially in light of the fact that we’ve begun a new Bible Study year and in light of the fact that this gifted sister in Christ, Christine Anderson, is leading us in instrumental worship with handbells?

One of the things that we often miss out on is knowing each other’s story. Your story is good news. It is in the safety of such a family as this that we can do something for each other and that is to share our personal news of salvation with each other. Maybe a good exercise for each student and adult Bible Study class would be for each person, who is a Christian, to share his or her own testimony of faith with the class. One person could take 10 minutes or less to do just that each Sunday morning. Now if we have time to talk about the next social event we have time to share personal testimonies, don’t we? The testimonies could be built around some simple questions: “How did you come to know Jesus Christ?” “What were the circumstances that led you to a conversion?” “How does your conversion help you live your life?”

I want us to understand that your story and my story really is news too good to keep ourselves. It occurred to me, as I had coffee with a dear friend this week, that most of us just don’t know each other’s news. If we would do that sort of thing, I really think that we would begin to discover that this organism called Tabernacle Baptist Church really does do something for us and that we have the opportunity and responsibility to do something for Tabernacle Baptist Church.

Paul began to tell what happened to him. He understood that witnessing is a natural consequence of an encounter with Jesus Christ. He further realized that his witness needed to begin where he was with those who knew him. Surely those disciples told their news to Paul just as he told his to them. That’s why he was with the disciples in Damascus for several days. He wanted them to hear his news and he wanted to hear their news. That is why this place must be a priority. This is precisely why we are to spend more time with each other, instructing and encouraging each other. It is not until we are able to share our personal news that is too good to keep with each other that we can share it with the skeptical world. Paul then went to the synagogues and other places proclaiming Jesus really is the Son of God.

If this encounter with Jesus Christ is all we have said it is, then we cannot keep from sharing it with others. Vance Havner was a pastor who served in Virginia. He spoke of Christians as “God’s post office.” We are daily giving out messages of some sort to the world. These messages do not come from us, but they come through us. It is our responsibility to deliver these messages to the world. Havner added this challenge: “The tiniest post-office can bear a letter that may wreck or bless a nation.” Then he

concluded, “If you are a believer, you are God's postmaster in the little nook where you live. Keep the office clean, but do not make that more important than delivering the messages.”

Let us remember that the church is in the business of delivering a message: the message of God's love in Jesus Christ for a loveless and skeptical world. We have the best news there is. It's even better than the news of the births of Emily and Nicholas 17 years ago and 14 years ago. The news we deliver affords a “new birth” for all who will believe. Let's deliver that news to each other and to the world. It really is news too good to keep! So are you skeptical about the church? Let me invite to experience a turn around moment today.

**Sermon by Dr. Jimmy Gentry, Pastor
Tabernacle Baptist Church
Carrollton, Georgia**

All scriptures, unless otherwise noted, are from The New Revised Standard Version, 1989.

¹ William Willimon, What's Right With the Church (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), pp. 63-64.