

November 14, 2021
Sermon Manuscript

Ready To Give A Reason (1 Pet 3:15)

If the Lord has brought us into a saving relationship with Himself, then He intends for us to be a beacon of His hope & love to others. Today we are reminded that for any of us who would seek to be faithful to this call, there will be times when words are necessary (like it or not). The good news is that just a small amount of preparation - some thoughtful consideration of the reasons for our hope - can exponentially increase the potential for God to use us in this way.

The Friday before last, our Diocese held its day-long Annual Convention in Merced. And it marked the first time that a *non-Anglican* was asked to be the Conventions keynote speaker. A man named Jud Boies was invited by Bishop Menees to speak to the clergy, delegates, and others in attendance. And to say that Jud is from a different church context than ours would be an understatement. He's on the pastoral staff at an evangelical church in the Sacramento area that has 20,000 in attendance every Sunday spread across eight different campuses. But in addition to this, Jud works for a non-profit ministry called "Church Goals" as a consultant to churches of any type and helping them implement strategies for growth.

Now, Church Growth is a movement, or industry, I honestly have some mixed feelings about. On the negative front it can have tendency to idolize growth and numbers *at any cost*, which has contributed to the crisis of evangelicalism we see today, where droves of Americans identify themselves as Christians and may even be connected to a church, but have little knowledge of the faith and behave more like culture war crusaders and political pawns than disciples of Jesus. But on a positive front some of the ideas that organizations like Church Goals might offer can be adapted quite well to the mission of a Church like ours and have the potential to bear much kingdom fruit.

So with any speaker like this I am cautious, but as *my* priest taught me back-in-the-day, when listening to any new voice it's important to be prayerful & discerning and to treat what is said like eating fish: where you take out the meat and leave the bones. And so today I want to share some meat I took out, which is an approach toward the unchurched that Jud introduced. I believe it could have some real value for us, particularly if we can tweak it *just a little bit* for our purposes and understanding of the gospel here at St Matthias Anglican.

Jud's challenge to us in one of his talks at the Convention was to ask whether we can support our faith and explain why we believe in Christ in 30 seconds. And he based this on verse 15 of our reading today from 1 Peter 3, where Christians are instructed to "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But (to) do this with gentleness and respect." So whatta you think? Could you do this? Could you provide a 30 second reason for the hope you have in Christ that might cause someone else to desire that hope as well?

Well, Jud has a 30 second explanation because he's taken the time to think about it - to think about the reason(s) for his hope - in advance. But *without* preparing in advance, I think if we're likely to miss opportunities when the Lord would want us to share the hope we've found in him, because we won't say anything at all or just stammer around and say something incoherent. (Or maybe that's just me.) So if someone asks Jud why he is a Christian or if he's in a situation where it seems appropriate to offer that explanation, he is prepared. And in your bulletin I've provided what Jud has come up with for himself. He says "There's three reasons why I'm a Christian -

1. "First, I've come to the conclusion that God is real and the Bible is true. My experience is that most people just want to ignore the evidence."
2. "Second, it changes lives beginning with my own. If you knew me before I was a Christian and then after, you would say, 'There's something different, and I like the new Jud better.'"

3. (And) “third, I believe there is something after this life as we know it. And because of number one and two, I know how I play into it.”

Now, in what sort of situation has Jud offered this to someone? Well, he recounted a time he was recently in the elevator recently of a high-rise in downtown Sacramento wearing a shirt with his church goals logo (also printed in your bulletin) and a guy on the elevator with him saw the G and asked Jud if he worked for Gatorade; it looks sorta like their logo. And Jud said, “No. This is actually the logo of a church organization I work for.” So the guy said “Oh, you go to Church?” or “You’re a Christian?” or something like that. And Jud said, “Yeah. You wanna know why?” And he noticed the elevator still had about twenty floors to go, so he gave his 30 second explanation.



Now, when Jud does this, if the conversation doesn’t go anywhere from that, Jud says he may close by telling them he thinks at some point everyone asks the question “Does God exist?” and challenging them to just pray and ask God once for the next seven days “If you do exist, reveal yourself to me” and he tells them the church he’s from invites them to come, and that’s it. [[This actually stood out to me because my own testimony I did precisely this. As a teenager I had abandoned the faith but eventually got to the point where I prayed that if God did exist, He would help me believe.]] So Jud leaves it to the Holy Spirit to move on the person’s heart (while letting them know how they can find him if He does).

But he says sometimes the person responds to the 30 second explanation wanting to know more. For example, this guy said, “That’s interesting.” And as the elevator door opened, he said, “Do you have a minute, because I’ve got a question or two I’d like to ask you.” And if this happens, Jud has a little more prepared, which I’ll share more about in a bit.

But as we think about our own faith, some parts of Jud’s 30 seconds may resonate for us as matching reasons for *our* hope, some may not. But I think we could all agree that his willingness to say *something* and having *something* to say *that he’s thought through* makes the likelihood that God could use Jud in an interaction like this exponentially greater. #

If the Lord has brought us into a saving relationship with Himself, then He intends for us to be a beacon of His hope & love to others. Today we are reminded that for any of us who would seek to be faithful to this call, there will be times when words are necessary (like it or not). The good news is that just a small amount of preparation - some thoughtful consideration of the reasons for our hope - can exponentially increase the potential for God to use us in this way.

Anyone who’s been around here very long has probably noticed that much of my ministry and teaching is centered upon taking Jesus’ Two Greatest Commandments seriously, which are declared in our liturgy each Sunday, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself...”¹ This emphasis on relying upon the Holy Spirit to love God & others *in this life* is critical for Christian discipleship in our 21st century America where this country’s Protestant roots combined with society’s training us to behave like consumers more than anything has led millions to conclude that Christianity is primarily about the afterlife - that you pray a little prayer, say the magic words, and you’ve punched a ticket to heaven - and that’s the extent of it. But following Jesus is so much more than that. It should make such a difference in this life, so much that heaven and the afterlife are almost an afterthought.

So, much of the focus of my preaching and teaching has been to direct our focus inward, on opening ourselves up for Jesus to cleanse our hearts. But our ultimate aim should be a spirituality that balances inward self-examination with an outward concern for the lost, for those living apart from Christ,

¹ Mt 22:37-40

one that cares *not only* about the Two Greatest Commandments but also about the Great Commission, where as we read from Matthew 28 today, Jesus commanded his disciples and therefore all believers to “go (out) and make disciples of all nations,” teaching them how to follow Jesus. Indeed, if we are seeking to cultivate hearts of love for our neighbors - for our fellow man - shouldn’t this ultimately manifest in a desire not just to love them as Christ has loved us, but for them to experience Christ’s love directly (and perfectly) through a saving relationship with Him?

Now, I know for many Anglicans our mentality about being a light to the world is guided by an aphorism often attributed to St Francis of Assisi: “Preach the gospel at all times; if necessary, use words.” Well, unfortunately, there’s no evidence that St Francis actually ever said this. And while there’s a kernel of truth in it - that we can’t merely use words - particularly for those we’re in personal relationships with to whom at some point we’ve shared where we stand, if our actions are serially incongruous with the way of Christ then this destroys the credibility of our witness. But for anyone to come to a saving relationship with Christ, words will certainly be necessary - in fact, they will be *indispensable* - somewhere along the line. And St. Peter seems to agree. Why else would he have said “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have”? #

If the Lord has brought us into a saving relationship with Himself, then He intends for us to be a beacon of His hope & love to others. And today we are reminded that for any of us who would seek to be faithful to this call, there will be times when words are necessary. The good news is that just a small amount of preparation - some thoughtful consideration of the reasons for our hope - can exponentially increase the potential for God to use us in this way.

Now Jud shared some statistics on this front that were pretty startling. He said

1. 50% of churches don’t bring anyone to faith each year.
2. Another 42% bring only one or two people to Christ (and according to Jud this is usually filling the seat of someone who departed)

So 50 + 42 is 92: 92% of churches are bringing only one or two people to Christ per year.² How many people have we led to Christ in the last year, two years, 5 years? Now Jud acknowledged that statistically many in Anglicanism are coming from another denomination. And he compared this to moving peas around on a dinner plate. But if that means there isn’t value in that, I disagree. As someone who has myself been in toxic churches & church traditions and been taught a whole lot of supposedly Christians ideas that at the end of the day don’t actually match up with the heart of Jesus, I have a heart for making St Matthias a safe haven from toxic Christianity and spiritual abuse. And I’ll welcome someone in from one of those churches without apology.

But what challenges me is can we not do both? Can we not be a next step for refugees from Evangelicalism or Roman Catholicism, but also be people who love the world out there enough to look for opportunities to share the reasons for our hope?

Jud noted that....

² Jud: “The majority of my data comes from David Olson’s work on Church statistics. A big part of his career has focused on Church Statistics. He studies church attendance by county. He’s written a great book called The American Church in Crisis with research based on data from 200,000+ churches. I know Dave personally and he’s done good research.”

3. 90% of our neighbors in California are not in church. 90%!³
4. And that may have something to do with only 15% of all Christians being willing to share their faith (which means 85% of Christians won't)⁴

So, obviously for many of us the whole idea of sharing our faith falls out of our comfort zone.

- For some of us, we may be uncomfortable not just sharing our faith but talking about faith or religion with anyone - someone told us that along with sex and politics, it's just not proper, but that someone wasn't Jesus.
- For others it may be the idea of being the ones to broach the topic in a conversation, but is there a way to throw something out there with whimsy rather than with intensity?
- Perhaps we're afraid that by signalling we're a christian people might assume things about us or associate us with Christians who in the public square have behaved very poorly in the name of Christ. Could we ask Jesus to grant us a willingness to risk being misunderstood, by resting in the fact that at least we're understood and known by him?

Could we ask Jesus to risk someone thinking us a fool for believing in a man who died and rose from the dead and now reigns over creation? Or might we, like we talked about last week, be allowing a sinful aversion to ever feeling uncomfortable be eclipsing our willingness to be faithful? Maybe being willing to talk about our faith - in a gentle and respectful way - is yet another opportunity for spiritual martyrdom in a society where there is some hostility toward the faith. So perhaps we could ask Jesus to build that hunger for faithfulness within us.

But if we get to the point of *willingness*, then there is the challenge of getting prepared. For me personally, I've been wrestling this week with what my thirty seconds might be. And it's still a work in progress - maybe my Life Group can help me out a little or give me some feedback - but in the bulletin I've also printed what I came up with to explain the reason for my hope - why I believe in Christ in just 30 seconds.

1. (I think first I would say) Following Jesus is not the same thing as (and is sometimes altogether different from) many of the things Christians have sadly become known for in our society
2. (Second I would say) Jesus has changed my life (taking this from Jud)
3. (And third, I would explain that) I follow him within the context of church, because that is where I find others who are broken and imperfect like me, but are seeking him, so I fit right in.

Now, as I mentioned, Jud doesn't only have his 30 seconds, he's also prepared something further to say on each of his points if someone were to ask about it, which altogether would total about 5 minutes for all three.

- So to expand on his first point, Jud will provocatively ask folks what year it was 20 years before Jesus was born. And people will often reflexively say, "20 B.C." But of course, 'B.C.' stands for "before Christ", so people wouldn't have known that was going to happen 20 years before it happened. Instead, Before Christ people would mark time by how many years the king had reigned. So in the Roman Empire, 20 years before Christ was the 7th year of the reign of Caesar Augustus; in China it was the 13th year of the reign of Emperor

³ Jud: "For example, I just did a very quick search of churches in Bakersfield and Google says there are 219 Christian churches. Statistically the average number of people church attendance is 75. But let's make it 100. This would mean there were 21,900 people in a Christian Church in Bakersfield on a Sunday. There are 377,917 people in Bakersfield. That means less than 6% of the population are in church (well under the 10% I used)."

⁴ Jud: "came from Bill Hybels when he was at Willow Creek in Chicago (probably not a great source to quote because of his position in ministry now but I don't doubt the statistic)."

Cheng; and so on. So Jud's point is that something really significant must have happened in the birth of Christ for every king in the world to give up the years being kept by their tenure and to instead be kept by the reign of this other king, Jesus.

- Now whether someone finds that compelling, might depend on the person. But that's what Jud says.
- To expand on point two that knowing Christ changes lives, he'll challenge the person to go ask any Christian how knowing Christ has changed their life.
- And to expand on his third point, about life after death, he challenges them do some research. Like you might research a place before going on a trip there, we all know we're gonna die. So he says to research all the different perspectives on this, including what the Bible teaches, and just see what you find. And he leaves the Holy Spirit to do what He will with that.

So, what you'd say in 30 seconds would of course dictate how you might support it if given five minutes. And it may or may not be anything like Jud's.

But as I was considering what my 30 seconds might be on my reasons for being a Christian, it occurred to me that ever since I've been an Anglican, I've also found a real need to explain what the heck Anglicanism is or why I'm an Anglican in 30 seconds or so. So I worked a little on this as well with a friend of mine. Here's what I've got:

- A. Anglicanism is a middle way between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, which I believe retains the best of both.
- B. There is no perfect church. But I find the Anglican provides the best opportunity for remaining faithful to God's truth because it takes scripture seriously, while also embracing mystery (unlike both liberal Christianity and fundamentalist Christianity⁵).

My friend, Fr Mark Hall, who I worked on this with suggested an alternative direction to B. Some of you may have heard of Anglicanism being described as a three-legged stool, held up by Scripture, Reason, and Church Tradition.⁶ Well, he suggests describing Anglicanism as a tricycle, which has one big wheel and two small wheels. The Big Wheel that directs one's faith and moves it forward is scripture, but this is counterbalanced by one smaller wheel of tradition (that guards against scripture being misinterpreted) and another smaller wheel of Reason (that allows us to address current events with our minds and guards against anti-intellectualism or wholesale opposition to science).

So what about you? Is this something you'd take some time to think about? I think the greatest value (faithful to St. Peter's command) would be to develop 30 seconds on why your hope is in Christ. And maybe your's would be similar to Jud's, maybe it'd be more like mine, or maybe it would go in a different direction. And for those who have been in the Church your whole lives and it doesn't quite make sense to say your life is different than it was apart from Christ, perhaps instead try to imagine what your life would be like without Jesus and what you would say about that. Our Life Groups will be invited to spend some time thinking about this in the coming week.

But maybe you're not there yet. Perhaps you're stuck at just not having a heart for those who don't know Jesus. Wherever you are, will you join me in prayer to ask for God's help - to bring before him our desire to be faithful and ask for him to do for us what he knows we need most....

⁵ Liberal and Fundamentalist Christianity both idolize certainty in different ways. Fundamentalism presumes to have everything about God figured out, while Liberal Christianity dismisses the things in scripture that seem difficult or mysterious and reverts instead to whatever (fallen) society believes on those fronts.

⁶ Although this concept is often attributed to Richard Hooker, apparently the closest he got to saying this was, "What Scripture doth plainly deliver, to that the first place both of credit and obedience are due; the next whereunto, is what any man can necessarily conclude by force of Reason; after this, the voice of the church succeedeth. That which the Church by her ecclesiastical authority shall probably think and define to be true or good, must in congruity of reason overrule all other inferior judgements whatsoever"(Laws of Ecclesiastical Politie V,8,2: 39, 8-14).

<https://anglicanway.org/2018/09/09/on-the-three-legged-stool-of-the-anglican-via-media/>