

Gentle and Reverent Evangelism

How do you practice and speak about your faith in a religiously diverse society? How should Christians relate to people of other religions?

These questions, which preoccupy many of us, are not just intellectual games we play with our faith. They matter. When we take stock of all the violence and oppression waged in the name of religion, we're acutely aware of the need to understand and work with people from other traditions.

And many of us *do* interact regularly, even very closely, with people who believe differently from us. So we may wonder—or worry—whether God's mercy extends to them; or whether our own understanding is as right and reliable as we'd hoped; or whether we are doing enough to bring them to Christ (as if that were our job and not Christ's).

Then, to complicate matters, we're called to evangelize: to bear public witness, through word and deed, to the reconciling love and hope that Christ has shown us.

Why? Because the world needs good news. And because we need to live the good news—because our faith is made relevant and effective as we live it out in the real, messy world. And because when we keep our religion private and stay in the company of our own kind, as Parker Palmer says, “we can laud our uniqueness and even denigrate others without being checked against reality, without being called to account. But public expression is accountable.”ⁱ

No doubt about it—we are to share the good news, to go public with our faith. The question is *how*.

Some answer with a fearful, domineering absolutism, claiming divine authority for themselves and exclusive rights on the truth. It's my way or the highway—to hell! They appoint themselves responsible for the correction and salvation of everyone who doesn't see things the way they do. They confuse evangelism with beating folks over the head with *my* faith, or winning them to *my* side, or making them agree with *me*.

But there's a problem here: these approaches put us in the place of God, and they resemble the competitive, condemning ways of this world more than the way of Christ. They seem to lack confidence in the wideness of God's mercy.

On the other side are those who are *so* wearied by religious conflict, *so* repelled by the complacency and hypocrisy of some very vocal Christians, *so* wary of participating in religious persecution, that they've given up. That they, too, have lost confidence. They retreat into comfortable circles of like-minded people. Or into the safety of private religion or a watered-down spirituality that's everything to everyone, and so really nothing to anyone.

We need another way, a way that's both humble and bold—a way that takes for granted the dignity of every human being and the infinite reach of God's grace. We need a way that speaks love.

In today's readings, we can make out some contours of this other way. 1st Peter addresses a budding Christian community that's holding on for dear life in a society that treats them like exiles and aliens. In this hostile, pluralistic culture, Peter coaches them in the first and most basic form of witness: simply living the way of Christ, a way of service and love and forgiveness. Simply holding onto their integrity, even in the smallest details and roughest patches of their lives. "Do what's good," he says. "Keep your conscience clean, don't repay evil for evil. "You need not fear, because Christ is Lord, so let people see your hope—"and always be ready to make an account, to anyone who asks, for the hope they see in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence."

This is exactly what Paul does in Athens, an anything-goes kind of place, a bustling marketplace of ideas. Paul is "deeply distressed" when he sees that the city is full of idols, which will never satisfy the people's hunger for the living God. It seems that he genuinely cares about them.

So he hangs out, listens, gets to know them—from the philosophers to the Jews to the novelty-seeking, cultural elite. Intrigued by Paul and his strange teachings, they ask him to tell them more. And when they ask, Paul's ready. He knows the content of his own faith, of course (Paul has been to Sunday school). But he also knows and respects the people he's addressing.

He begins his account with reverence, and common ground, praising them for their religiosity, and looking for a point of intersection between his belief and theirs. He looks for how God might be appearing to them already. And he points to this altar to an unknown God, and through it, draws their attention to the creating redeeming God, the God who transcends human imagination and structures and divisions. He's not scared of their difference from him, but rather takes their culture and theologies seriously, and builds upon them. And his encounter with them helps him articulate something new about his own faith.

Then he bravely ventures forward, into the particularities of Christian faith, though he doesn't use insider language or drop names and big words. Note that he never uses Jesus' name, though he tells them what they need to know about him—that God has raised him from the dead for all. He cares less about them saying certain words than about them knowing the living, loving God, as revealed through Christ.

Even when Paul moves into his distinctly Christian message, he remembers their common ancestry in God. This is not one superior human being or race, deigning to enlighten an inferior or ignorant one. This is one child of God speaking with another.

So, yes, Paul *does* give an account of the hope that's in him, and he does it with gentleness and reverence. With care and preparation and respect. And only after listening and building relationship.

This is a good starting point for us, too: to listen, to learn, and to be in relationship; to be honest and authentic; to offer who we are and what we believe; to own our positions; and to open ourselves up to scrutiny, to accountability.

And it works—I've seen it work. As you may know, I direct a Christian theology program for incarcerated women. Our classes are made up of Muslims, atheists, an occasional Wiccan, lots of the spiritual-but-not-religious, and almost every flavor of Christian (except Episcopalian). Week after week, we dare to talk about God and the Bible and faith and what all of it means, in light of our varied experiences.

Last week two very different women had been assigned to present theological reflections on their readings about Alice Walker's *Color Purple*. Deeⁱⁱ talked about how she'd given up on God a long time ago, when she experienced rejection and condemnation from the church because she was gay. And about how she was discerning a new face of God in prison. Her relationship with God was changing, and she was excited and hopeful about her fledgling faith.

Then Brittney read a letter reflecting on and defending her atheism. She too had been hurt by many of the Christians in her life. So she'd concluded that it was easier and freer to have no expectations of the being we call "God." That way, she wouldn't be disappointed, nor bound by oppressive images of God. And that way, she could experience the divine in whatever way it came to her.

I tensed up, worried that we were headed toward conflict and hurt feelings. But the women listened to each other, offered their own pieces of the truth, and received each other's offering with love and care. As the rest of the class, and I, chimed in, I think we all took a small step forward in owning our faith and in *trusting* God and each other. And trusting in the creative, reconciling process of open dialogue.

It seems that God didn't need us all to agree after all (though, honestly, that would be so much easier!). It seems, rather, that perhaps all God wanted was for us to love each other and to grope, together, toward the divine mystery.

ⁱ Parker Palmer, *The Company of Strangers*, 157.

ⁱⁱ Not their real names.