

Quarantined
By Terry Smith
Mark 4:1-9, 13-20

A number of years ago, when I was quite young, perhaps six or seven, I came down with something and was pretty sick. To make matters worse my little sister seemed to be catching the same thing. My mother called our old family doctor for advice and two remarkable things happened...perhaps not so remarkable for those days but they would be now. The first thing was that when my mother expressed her concern, the doctor said "I'll stop at your house later today." Sure enough, that afternoon he did come to our house. It didn't take him long to determine that we had the measles or mumps or chicken pox...I don't remember which one it was that time...kids of that era collected them all.

The second remarkable thing that happened was that after he had given my mother instructions on our care the doctor stopped outside our front door and tacked up a poster that said "Quarantined" in big letters, with smaller writing warning that people in our house had a communicable disease and all contact with us should be avoided. I'm sure they don't do that anymore; it would probably be a violation of our rights, although it made my sister and I feel quite special. The principle in play, though, was a valid one: an effective way to stop the spread of our condition to others was to isolate us, the carriers.

Sometimes a similar thing happens with our Christian faith. By far the most common way for one to become a Christian is through close contact with someone who is a believer: family members, friends, neighbors, co-workers...they were carriers and most of us came through that door. To our great joy we've found a hope we never knew we could have and we've begun to live a life we never knew we could live. When some of Jesus' followers were abandoning him, he turned to his disciples and asked "Are you going to leave me too?" Peter's response was "Where else would we go?" That's the way many of us feel, too; we're so sure of our Christianity that we've put all of our eggs in this one basket. We can't imagine any other way to live. We've found friendship with a group of other Christians, we're getting good spiritual input, and we find ourselves, quite naturally, turning inward. Over time we tend to have more and more contact with fellow believers, which is good...but less and less meaningful contact with people who don't know the Lord which, I would argue, is not so good.

I'd like you to use your imagination for a few moments. Imagine that you have never picked up a Bible and have no idea what's in it. Imagine that you know, in an abstract way, that your life will one day end but you have no knowledge of what will happen then. Imagine that someone you care about has just received a grim diagnosis and all you know to do is to hope for the best. Imagine that you have never entered a church and don't have a notion what happens inside those walls. Difficult as it may be for us to think in those terms, there are people all around us who completely fit that description. How can our hearts not go out to them? For most of them, their only hope of finding the way out of their dilemma is contact with a carrier of Christianity. They need to catch what we have.

Here's how it can work: Liz and I know a wonderful couple named Tom and Millie. We met them about forty-five years ago when they started attending the church we went to in St. Paul. I wish I could have brought them here this morning to tell their story but I'll have to cover it as best I can.

Millie grew up in New York City. All these years later you can still hear a little bit of New York in her voice. She was one of those people I just described who had no idea what Christianity was about. Tom was another one. His dad owned a neighborhood tavern and Tom literally grew up in a bar room. They were a young married couple, excitedly expecting a child, when tragedy struck. Their little girl died at birth and they were devastated. Millie especially just couldn't get over her grief.

Not long after this a woman acquaintance invited Millie to a Christian women's event. The draw for Millie was that the woman who would be speaking there had lost a seven-year-old child so she agreed to go. As the speaker talked about how God had helped to deal with her loss, a whole new world opened up for Millie. She found out that she could have hope for eternity and even look forward to meeting her lost little girl in heaven. By the end of the meeting Millie had decided that she wanted to give her life to Christ.

Tom had a typical guy reaction when Millie came home and told him she'd become a Christian. He said "Anything that will make my wife stop crying all the time is a good thing." It wasn't long before they were a Christian couple. But here's the thing: they hardly knew any other Christians. They'd never been to a seminar on evangelism or read any books on how to reach people for Christ. They only knew that there were people who were just as they had recently been and they were bursting with good news for them. They led all of Millie's family to the Lord. They started inviting their neighbors over to their house where they would give them a beer and tell them about Jesus. Later on, they discovered that 7 Up or Pepsi worked just as well. Soon the lady across the street from them became a Christian...later her husband did as well. Tom worked in a hospital and when they started attending our church it was normal to see him bring one or two co-workers with him. They had the most infectious brand of Christianity of any couple that I've known. We only cross paths about once a year or so now but the last time I talked with Tom he said "Becoming a Christian is still the biggest thing that ever happened to me."

I don't know of anyone more single minded in his efforts to reach the lost than Paul the apostle. Let me read to you his description of a technique he used to connect with them (I Cor. 9:19-23). That could sound almost like the pandering of a politician but Paul used the technique for a different end: he wanted to graciously and practically build bridges between his world and the worlds of those he was trying to reach. So how would we do that in 2019?

-We'd look for ways to find common ground.

-We'd work at learning how to socialize with non-Christians. That would be a pretty big deal for some of us.

-Sometimes we would do things we're not that interested in to make a connection. Some years ago, when we were fairly new in our neighborhood, I wanted to get acquainted with one of my neighbors. I knew that he was into sailing and had a small sailboat on our lake so I asked if I could go out on his boat with him sometime. He was excited to take me and we set a date. When the time came, I thought I would just saunter down to his dock, jump on his boat, and go for a ride, but I found that there was more to it than that.

"Do you know sailing terminology?" he asked. "Oh, just the basic stuff," I replied, "Avast ye lubbers" and "Yo, ho, ho." He didn't even blink, but went on to spend fifteen minutes telling me ten times more than I wanted to know about the name of every part of his boat. I haven't been sailing since but my neighbor and I are great friends and he knows about my relationship with God...and God isn't done with him yet.

Jesus used a lot of stories to illustrate the points he wanted to make. The one we read today was about a farmer who planted some grain with a technique used from the earliest times until the industrial revolution. He carried his grain in a sack, probably like the one I used to carry newspapers when I was a kid. He would reach into the sack, grab a handful of kernels, and expertly broadcast them with a sweep of his hand. Then he'd take a step or two and repeat until all of the seed was gone or he'd covered the area he wanted to plant. The farmer knew that not all of the seed he planted would successfully reproduce. He also knew that it would be impossible to look at a handful of seeds and know which ones would grow to maturity and which ones might wither or be eaten by birds. The thing that made the exercise worthwhile was the knowledge that some of the seed would flourish and the crop that resulted would be worth the effort. Not all of the people Tom and Millie told their story to became Christians. In fact, most of them didn't...but some did and that became the harvest that made it all worthwhile. Our job is to become winsome examples of Christianity. It's the Holy Spirit's job to draw people to God.

It's not my intention to convince you to be something that you're not. You don't need to go door-to-door, talking to strangers and attempting to convince them to repent. You don't need to stand on a corner and hold up a sign or buttonhole people at the grocery store. There may be a few exceptional people who can make those techniques work; most of us cannot. I'm suggesting we all do three things:

-Live lives that can bear scrutiny. If the way we behave isn't consistent with Christianity, there's no sense even trying to go any further.

-Realize that we each have a unique sphere of influence. There's a group of people in my life that you will never meet and, if you did, you wouldn't have the credibility with them that I have. If they're ever going to hear about how good it is to know the Lord, I may be their only hope. The same is true for each of you.

-Be brave enough...or compassionate enough...or kind enough to take every opportunity to share what a relationship with Jesus means to you. You don't have to give them the whole truckload at once. "You must be born again" is not the best opening statement in most cases.

There used to be a group of several people who would station themselves along the course at Grandma's Marathon, holding signs and preaching to the runners as we passed. It was a big congregation...about 8500 runners in the half marathon and 8000 in the full...but the sermon had to be short because we were moving in and out of earshot at a pretty good pace. The speaker would shout things like "You're all going to hell if you don't repent" or "You might not live to see tomorrow. Then what will happen?"

I never heard them say anything that wasn't true, but the delivery style didn't seem to be very effective. In a marathon, runners talk to each other a lot. For a block or so after we would pass the preacher all I ever heard was derisive or disgusted comments about the nut with the bullhorn. I actually thought about stopping and trying to exchange ideas with the man about techniques for evangelism but I didn't think he'd welcome the interruption. As the last runner passed by, I'm sure the street preacher felt he'd fulfilled his calling. To what end, I'm not sure.

But kind, gracious, honest expression with people who know you of how God has worked in your life or what impact he's had on your family may go a lot further than you would imagine

In his letter to the Colossian Christians Paul slips in a little advice: "Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone." (Colossians 4:5-6). Two sentences, three thoughts:

-Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders. If there's a wise way, there must also be an unwise way. I'll come to that in a moment.

-Make the most of every opportunity

-Converse graciously. It may not be as easy to say what gracious conversation is as to say what it isn't. It isn't the raucous name-calling that pours from every side of the political debate or the vitriol that swirls around in the social media universe. It isn't off-color humor or back stabbing analysis of others. Especially in the workplace it's so easy to get into the habit of tearing fellow workers down. Those kinds of conversations can erase all of our credibility as examples of Christianity.

Quite a few years ago I made myself a promise that I would never miss an opportunity to tell people that I am a Christian and it really means something to me. It was important for me to decide that in advance because the chances often came unexpectedly and it was too easy to let them slip right by. Over the years since I've had many conversations, some short, some hours long with people who were interested...or curious...or skeptical. In the rough and tumble world I worked in I was surprised to find that some of the toughest characters I worked with were the most interested. Whatever the result, I want to keep throwing the seed out.

One of the most dramatic opportunities I had came as a result of a tragedy. In 1990 several Duluth detectives I'd worked with a lot went to a run-down hotel in the seedy west end area of town looking for a man they had a warrant for. When they knocked on the hotel room door the suspect opened fire through the wall, hitting two officers and killing one. An on-duty death like this hits a department hard. The detective was well liked and left behind a young family. Every cop thinks, "I've done that same thing many times. That could have been me." I actually had the same experience myself a few years later except the bullets missed. About a month after the death in Duluth the St. Louis County Sheriff called me. He told me that a number of officers in that area were having a very difficult time dealing with the tragedy. He said that they were planning a law enforcement memorial breakfast and wanted me to come and talk to the group. "What do you want me to talk about?" I asked. "Tell us what it means to you to be a Christian police officer," he said. A few weeks later I stood in front of a group of about a hundred red-eyed cops, lawyers, and judges and told them about the hope that Christ had brought to me. I told them that if one day I too went down in a doorway, things would still be all right because I had made peace with God. What impact did any of this have? I don't know. About ten years later I ran into a Jewish attorney who'd been at that breakfast and the first thing he brought up was his recollection of the time I had talked to them. About a year ago the sheriff who invited me

to speak passed away. A retired judge from Duluth, a very devout Christian, told me that he had the opportunity to pray with the sheriff before he died.

I want to close by telling you how one person's faithful testimony affected my family. Almost a hundred years ago, in the early 1920's, my grandparents had a small farm near Princeton, Minnesota. A neighbor woman, whose name I don't know, began to talk to my grandmother about her need for Jesus and my grandmother was receptive and gave her life to the Lord. At first my grandfather was not receptive. "Now we'll never have any fun" was his reported complaint when she told him she'd become a Christian. Grandma must have been pretty persuasive though, because it wasn't long before he'd given his life to God as well. So, my mother and her seven brothers and sisters had the great privilege of growing up in a home where Christ was at the center of things. This carried forward into my generation, then our children's generation, on into grandchildren, and now even a scattering of great grandchildren. I tried to count how many of us there are at this moment. If I could get the whole group together on the platform here this morning, starting with grandpa and grandma and continuing on to my two little grandsons, who don't even know where they are yet, I think there'd be about 187 of us. You might not be impressed by our looks but there's one thing about us that stands out: probably 95% of us are Christians and we're praying for that other 5%. Some have wandered far away from the Lord for a time but most have come back. One-hundred percent of us know the way of salvation. I'm so thankful for a woman who I have never met who cared enough to talk to a young neighbor about her need for the Lord. She thought she was just talking to my grandma, but she was talking to all of us...187 and counting.

Whenever I speak anywhere, I realize that people won't remember everything I say. I always like to summarize the main points so you'll remember what I thought was most important. Here they are:

- We're surrounded by people who don't know the Lord**
- Each of us has a unique sphere of influence**
- To have a valid testimony we need to live out authentic Christianity**
- Make the most of every opportunity to tell people what God has done for you and your family**
- You may represent the only hope that some people in your sphere of influence have**

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