

Welcome

I was in a band in college - we got just big enough to get to be the local opener for national acts coming through on tour. One of my favorite shows was when Coheed & Cambria came through on their first national tour, right before they released their first album. Even then they were great live, but what made it so memorable was the conversation I had with their drummer.

We ended up hanging out after the show, talking for a couple of hours. He was a warm, funny, energetic guy, and before too long, he asked the question we got all the time: "Are you guys a Christian band?"

That was a complicated question in the early 2000s - we were all Christians, and a lot of the stuff I wrote about in my songs had Christian themes, but we didn't preach at shows or anything. But we preferred powerade to beer and we didn't cuss at the audience like most of the bands, so we got the question a lot. So I said, "Yeah, we're Christians."

He was full of questions about faith and religion. I can't remember everything we talked about, but he was genuinely curious why I was a Christian. He didn't know much about Christianity, but so little of what he had seen piqued his interest. So when he asked, I told him: I just think Jesus is awesome.

Really? He asked. What do you mean?

So I started telling him stories about Jesus - about how he constantly got the upper hand by outwitting the people who tried to trap him. And how fiercely he defended those without power. I told the story of the woman caught in adultery, brought to Jesus to be stoned to death. I told him how Jesus wrote in the dirt, then looked up at the crowd and said,

But before I could quote Jesus, he did it for me. He yelled out, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone!"

Then he laughed that sort of laugh you do when you discover something good. "I never knew where that quote came from! That's from *Jesus?!!*"

We didn't get to talk too much longer after that, but he left excited to read the Gospels, to learn more about Jesus. Almost the last thing he said to me was, "Jesus is awesome!"

Which... yeah. Jesus is awesome! We're going to talk about that today - how when we're sharing the good news about Jesus with people, the best thing we can do is keep our conversations focused on the main thing - Jesus. He is, after all, the good news. And there's a whole lot else we can not know or be confused or even be wrong about and it doesn't matter as long as we're focused on that main thing: Jesus.

Message

We're in the Church season of Epiphany, the season that follows Christmas. Epiphany celebrates the God came not just for us, but for the whole world. Appropriately, then, our Epiphany series this year is called Good News for a Change. We're talking about how to talk about Jesus... with anyone. The \$20 word for this is Evangelism, and it's a word with enough baggage to make just about anyone break out in a nervous sweat. Whether you've been preached at or sat through those classes on how to preach at people, Evangelism conjures to mind that combative, confrontational, in-your-face kind of approach, or maybe just having no idea how to talk about Jesus with people we really care about.

Throughout this series, we're going to explore a lot of the ways we get Evangelism wrong, and why it's a lot more fun than we would've imagined. We began by talking about what the Gospel even is - that it means "Good News". Then we spent some time asking how God is good news - both in our own lives and in the lives of people we care about. And last week, we explored how to translate the good news out of our language into the world of the person we're talking to.

So this week, let's talk about the objections that come up when we're sharing the good news. If you've ever had a conversation with someone about faith, you know questions come up. They're questions you've asked yourself. Big questions about suffering or the relationship between faith and science or the Church and sexuality. There's a whole industry devoted to answering these questions - historically it's called Apologetics.

Growing up, I confused Apologetics and Evangelism, and in my experience as a pastor, I see a lot of folks still confusing them. We mistake arguing about faith for sharing the good news about Jesus. But throughout this series, we've insisted that faith is a relationship, not a set of beliefs. The Evangelism question isn't, "Do you believe the right things?" It's "Do you know Jesus?"

Which means that when we get caught up in arguing about doctrines or politics instead of staying focused on Jesus, we're not good newsing anymore (which isn't a news flash to a lot of you who've been caught up in those arguments. They sure don't FEEL like good news).

Instead, we should take a cue from Jesus, and keep the conversation focused on the heart of the good news: a relationship with him!

[Scripture Slide] Turn with me to John 4. Jesus is travelling from Jerusalem back to the Galilee, and he goes through Samaria, which we could easily say is hostile territory - Jews and Samaritans didn't get along at all.

This famous encounter Jesus has is with a Samaritan woman. If you made a list of people you wouldn't find hanging out in Jesus' day, a well-respected Jewish rabbi like Jesus and an outcast Samaritan woman would've been among the least-likely conversation partners they could've imagined. So let's read their conversation together. You'll notice that Jesus does what we've been exploring throughout this series:

Jesus came to the Samaritan village of Sychar, near the field that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there; and Jesus, tired from the long walk, sat wearily beside the well about noontime. Soon a Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Please give me a drink." He was alone at the time because his disciples had gone into the village to buy some food.

This woman has come to a well in the middle of the day. That tells Jesus a couple of important pieces of information. First, she needs water. Second, she's isolated - getting water was a communal activity the women of the town did early or late in the day, when it was cooler. That she comes alone at midday is a sign she's not integrated into the community. She's lonely.

But how does Jesus initiate a conversation for her? He connects with her where she is. She needs water, and so does he. They're both thirsty, and this thirst is enough for Jesus to bypass all the social norms that divide them.

The woman was surprised, for Jews refuse to have anything to do with Samaritans. She said to Jesus, "You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan woman. Why are you asking me for a drink?"

Jesus replied, "If you only knew the gift God has for you and who you are speaking to, you would ask me, and I would give you living water."

Here, Jesus pushes the conversation into the beginnings of something spiritual by making a play on words. Ancient people had a hierarchy of drinking water. The worst was still water - rainwater collected in cisterns. It would do in a pinch (or in a drought!), but stagnant water breeds disease, and gets stale.

Next was well water. It was fresh, but hard to get at, being underground. This particular well, Jacob's Well, was over a thousand years old by Jesus' day - well-known and reliable.

The best water was fresh water - water from streams or rivers. Because it was constantly flowing and easily accessible, they called it living water.

So Jesus is making a joke here, of sorts. He's insisting that he has better water to offer the woman than what she can offer him from the well. But she's not exactly impressed.

It's possible to read this straight, like they're just having a conversation. But this woman has been through some stuff. She's not an innocent, wide-eyed waif amazed by this rabbi.

When I read her words, I hear a lot of skepticism (and rightfully so, right ladies? How do you react when a random dude struts up to you and starts bragging?)

But sir, you don't have a rope or a bucket," she said, "and this well is very deep. Where would you get this living water? And besides, do you think you're greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us this well? How can you offer better water than he and his sons and his animals enjoyed?"

Jesus replied, “Anyone who drinks this water will soon become thirsty again. But those who drink the water I give will never be thirsty again. It becomes a fresh, bubbling spring within them, giving them eternal life.”

“Please, sir,” the woman said, “give me this water! Then I’ll never be thirsty again, and I won’t have to come here to get water.”

Here’s where Jesus pivots:

Go and get your husband,” Jesus told her.

“I don’t have a husband,” the woman replied.

Jesus said, “You’re right! You don’t have a husband— for you have had five husbands, and you aren’t even married to the man you’re living with now. You certainly spoke the truth!”

“Sir,” the woman said, “you must be a prophet. So tell me, why is it that you Jews insist that Jerusalem is the only place of worship, while we Samaritans claim it is here at Mount Gerizim, where our ancestors worshiped?”

The woman immediately realizes this isn't what she thought it was. Jesus isn't some random guy hitting on her at the local watering hole. He's some sort of spiritual leader - a prophet, she guesses. She realizes all that talk about living water wasn't just idle boasting. He's really trying to offer her something he believes is life-changing.

So she does what a lot of folks do in this situation. She brings up theological roadblocks. In this case, it's that Jews and Samaritans worship differently - the Jewish temple is on Jerusalem and the Samaritan temple is on Mt. Gerizim. So who's right?

Watch what Jesus does - he sidesteps her theological objections and invites her to understand who he really is:

Jesus replied, “Believe me, dear woman, the time is coming when it will no longer matter whether you worship the Father on this mountain or in Jerusalem. You Samaritans know very little about the one you worship, while we Jews know all about him, for salvation comes through the Jews.

But the time is coming—indeed it’s here now—when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. The Father is looking for those who will worship him that way. For God is Spirit, so those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth.”

The woman said, “I know the Messiah is coming—the one who is called Christ. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.”

Then Jesus told her, “I AM the Messiah!” -- John 4:5-26

Jesus didn't let anything - even theological disagreement - get in the way of inviting this woman (and ultimately her whole town!) into relationship with him.

Wow.

Far too often, we get it in our heads that people have to agree with us before they meet Jesus. We have a whole list of beliefs and practices we turn into prerequisites. People have to agree with us politically. Or they have to believe in a literal interpretation of the creation stories in Genesis. Or have a particular view of the End Times.

I'm not a six day creationist. I have no problem with the universe being 13 billion years old, as scientists tell us. And Genesis is one of my favorite books in the Bible (as you probably know if you've been listening to my preaching long). There was a guy at my last church who was a big creationist. And when he found out I wasn't, he got pretty mad (now, this guy is one of the kindest humans I've ever met, so when I say he got pretty mad, it's not like he wanted to fight me in the parking lot or anything). We emailed back and forth for a while about my beliefs, and eventually we got to why this was such a sensitive issue for him. It turned out that his brother is a scientist who had rejected Christianity because he just couldn't believe in an Earth that's only 6,000 years old. He had been told he had to accept either God or science, he couldn't have both.

And my heart broke because do you want to guess where in the Bible it says we have to choose between God and science?

That's right - nowhere.

I wish I knew that brother so I could tell him you can be a scientist and have a relationship with Jesus - the two aren't mutually exclusive, not by a long shot.

Friends there is nothing that separates us from Jesus. We saw in the first week of this series that God is already with us, present in our lives, inviting us into relationship. There are no prerequisites.

Does that mean that none of the rest of it matters? Well no, not exactly. It all matters a lot, but it has to be grounded in relationship (just like with you and me - we probably shouldn't start by discussing religion and politics, without any relationship. That never ends well!)

So too, with Jesus. When we're sharing the good news, we have to make sure it's the actual good news. The good news isn't a list of facts and doctrines to believe. The Good News isn't a bunch of information. The good news is that Jesus wants to be in relationship with us. So let's keep the good news good.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Free invitation to Jesus' table. All that's required is that we're hungry and thirsty.

Assignment + Blessing

Initiate a spiritual conversation this week. Like Jesus, begin where the person is. How well do you note their concerns and questions?