



Pastor Ken Nelson's Sermon

SERMON – 7TH EASTER

JOHN 17:20-26

MAY 29, 2022

“WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE?”

Don Everts is a pastor – trained to talk about God. He has worked on college campuses for Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, where *“chatting up people about God”* was his ministry. Despite that, he considered himself a “reluctant conversationalist” when it came to his faith. He knew by heart passages that conveyed the gospel clearly – John 3:16, *“for God so loved the world”*, Romans 6:23, *“for the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus*, or Mark 10:45, *“for even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.”*

He knew the passages that called God’s people witnesses to others – Isaiah 52:7 *“how beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news”*, Acts 1:8, *“you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth”*, and Matthew 28:18 *“go and make disciples of all nations...”* Nevertheless, he considered faith conversations pesky, painful, awkward things. Some years ago he found himself on a Greyhound bus riding from a small town in Oregon to Tacoma, Washington, seated, perhaps a better description is “wedged against” a young woman. He was on the aisle – she had the window seat. Translation – he had a captive audience. But for 13 hours they said not a word.

Part of the reason was that Pastor Everts was engrossed in his book – on relational evangelism! I kid you not! All the while a war was going on inside of him – not unlike the war we can imagine going on inside of Peter in the courtyard outside the room where Jesus was on trial. *‘Should I stay or should I go - say I know him or I deny it’* was Peter’s war. Pastor Everts war was *“should I introduce myself or respect the social space between me and her”*, which in our culture is sacred space, far wider than the 8 -10 inches that separated them on that bus.

After all that time reading about relational evangelism, Don finally managed an opening line – “hi.” To which the startled young lady said “hey.” What’s next – the weather? But then he remembered a line someone on a plane said to him as they strapped themselves in for their flight – *“are you going or are you coming?”* Not bad...so he used it – to which his seat mate said, *“I’m not really sure.”* Next thing you know Pastor Everts was getting a life story. He listened to a pretty sad one –hoping when she finished, he’d have the courage to suggest Jesus Christ could lead her somewhere better.

That was about it too – cause this conversation needed to end – it’s was Don’s stop. He hopped off having no idea if his fellow traveler ever pursued or met another Christian bold enough to take the conversation about becoming a Christ follower any further. If John 17 be our guide, that is what Jesus is praying we do. John 17 has been called “Jesus high priestly prayer” because it is almost entirely an “intercessory prayer” – praying for someone else. It has also be called “the Lord’s Prayer” because it’s an actual example of Jesus praying.

“I pray for those who will believe in me through their message” ought to jar us a bit. Jesus is praying for the people he wants us to bring into his kingdom. Some think Jesus is praying that correct doctrines are upheld by the church – that could be. Little good, and perhaps a great deal of harm has arisen from mischief done by “innovative” teachers and preachers. But I want to suggest more frequent use this version of our “Lord’s Prayer”. I’ll bet 90% of the prayers you and I pray or are asked to pray are for others who need healing.

Rarely am I asked to pray for those who know Jesus not, nor to ready ourselves to be the witnesses we are called to be. It’s not that you don’t know people who don’t know Jesus...or who have slid from the faith. But somehow, that sort of thing has become “unmentionable.” We’ll relay someone’s health condition, but clam up about their spiritual condition, as though their salvation does not mean as much to us as their recovery from surgery. So first off, I ask you to pray, as our Lord taught us, for the faith of others and our part in presenting Jesus to them.

And then I ask this. Raise your hand if you have a will. A will tells your heirs how you want your physical possessions to be divided – yes? It tells them you care enough about them to share those things with them. Now raise your hand if you have told the people you might have in your will what you believe.

You may say *“I do that all the time”* – I bring my kids to church, pray and read the bible with them. My family knows I belong to a church. But have you told them why? Studies suggest the most common ways of sharing faith among American Christians is how we live, followed by asking questions about someone else’s beliefs. Further down the list, quite a bit actually, is praying for a person you may spend time with, in anticipation of a chance to witness –and further down still is telling them how you to believe or how Christ has affected your life.

That’s what I think we must address. If you have bequeathed to someone your physical possessions, your things, bequeath to them your faith story. If by a will or guardianship document you have provided for the care and protection of your children should you die, leave them the story of how you believe you died in the arms of Jesus, that you believe he is your eternal provider and protector.

In a class we are conducting on faith sharing, we talk about ways to ease into a conversation, and how to be active, humble listeners if the story of faith comes up. I have left on the table in the entry resources you can take if you want to know more about that. No small number of us in the class acknowledge, even agonize over the faith of others in our family. How to begin or re-start a conversation about faith is not easy. For that I refer us back to point one – and the one who is praying for the faith of those who hear our message.

Even I, like Pastor Don Everts, trained to talk about God, find myself a reluctant conversationalist. I told this to the class last week. I said I know my kids know what I do – but do they know what I believe? I intend to see that they do. Start there with your witnessing – write a spiritual will and testament – express what you believe, what your faith has meant to you including where and how it has and still does waver. It’s your message, and Jesus is praying that others will believe because of it. Not bad for starters. Besides, it’s Memorial Day – what better time to do something that you want remembered? To God alone be the glory ... AMEN