

## **Persevere!**

### [2 Timothy 4:1-5](#)

A young pastor was sitting in a restaurant eating lunch. He opened a letter from his mother that he just got that morning. When he opened it a twenty dollar bill fell out. He thought: "Thanks, mom, I can use that right now." As he finished his meal he noticed a beggar outside on the sidewalk leaning against the light post. He thought: "That man can probably use the \$20 more than I."

He crossed out the names on the envelope, enclosed the \$20, and wrote across the top in large letters PERSEVERE! So as not to make a scene, he put the envelope under his arm and dropped it as he walked past the man. The man picked it up, read the message, and smiled.

The next day while the pastor was eating his lunch at the same restaurant the same man tapped him on the shoulder and handed him a big wad of bills. Surprised the young pastor asked him what that was for. The man replied, "This is your half of the winnings. PERSEVERE came in first in the fourth race at Arlington yesterday and he paid 30 to 1."

This is Laity Sunday and we are going to persevere in our spiritual walk, but no money will change hands.

Some of you are experiencing your first involvement with the United Methodist denomination. You are the laity. I am the Lay Leader. It is my responsibility to support the minister and also to represent you in working with the pastor for the mission and vision of the congregation. That kind of makes me the monkey in the middle, a position I enjoy.

Each year the church has a theme for Laity Sunday on which the Lay Leader may speak. This year the theme is "Therefore, Go!: With HOPE Through Offering Christ." As we found out last year from the notes written by the Northern Illinois Conference, HOPE is an acronym which stands for Hospitality, Offer Christ, Purpose, and Engagement. Offering Christ occurs when we provide opportunities

for people to commit their lives to God through baptism by water and Spirit and profession of faith.

John Wesley was the founder of the Methodist movement. He was born in 1703 in Epworth, England, the son of a Church of England clergyman. Wesley and the early Methodists were resolute about inviting people to experience God's grace and to develop their knowledge and love of God through disciplined Christian living. To accomplish this they advised that one must put faith and love into action. Wesley referred to this as "practical divinity" and it continues as a hallmark of United Methodism today.

Thomas Coke was an assistant to John Wesley. He was sent to the United States in November, 1784 with instructions from Wesley to ordain and consecrate ministers in the new country. When Wesley called for volunteers to go to America, Francis Asbury went. Wesley charged them to "Offer them Christ."

Francis Asbury was from a humble English family. His mother Eliza, a devout Christian, welcomed many evangelical speakers into their home. Young Francis became a Methodist because he regarded them as "the purest of any people now in the world."

OK, let's not get ahead of ourselves here with any back-patting. We have more work to do to reach that purest high-water mark.

As we grow up, until we learn that we can self-identify we receive our identity from others: friends and colleagues, society, and family. When we become Christian we receive a new identity from Christ who claims us and instructs us. Baptism by water celebrates becoming that new person. (UM website: A United Methodist Understanding of Baptism) Most of us were probably baptized as babies and unless we then undertook the study of Christian doctrine hearing this lovely explanation of baptism may be a first.

To comprehend Wesley's concept of being baptized in the spirit we can look to Wesley's sermons. Chris Ritter states in his article *Seven Ways John Wesley Preached about the Holy Spirit* that Wesley believed "To be a Christian in the biblical sense of the word is to

experience a total inward transformation of the soul that can only be wrought by the power of the Holy Spirit. For Wesley, the New Birth is a birth in and by the Spirit.”

Ritter continues, “In Wesley’s sermon, *The Great Privilege of Those Who are Born of God*, Wesley states...this expression, ‘the being born of God...’ implies...a vast inward change, a change wrought in the soul, by the operation of the Holy Ghost; a change in the whole manner of our existence; for, from the moment we are born of God, we live in quite another manner than we did before; we are, as it were, in another world.”

I have spent half my life going to colleges and universities accumulating degrees. I know how to read, analyze, and report on complex writings. Undertaking the theology of John Wesley is like signing up for Advanced Spiritual Doctrine 101. I have never been able to wrap my head around the idea that the way to offer Christ to the non-churched is to sit them down for a conversation on prevenient grace.

So, let’s explore some other ways of offering Christ.

I have known Laurie Geiger for nine years. Many of you have known her longer and better than I, but I consider her my friend. She is one of my Sunday School teachers. She’s on the Evangelism Committee with me. We talk horses and dogs. I have been to three memorial services in this church for people that she’s lost: her husband, Chad, her father, and most recently her son, Eric.

Chad was my Sound Guy when I gave the Children’s Sermons and I used to talk race horses with him. A year after he passed I was reading the names on All Saints Sunday and I got completely choked up when I got to his name. Her father’s memorial service was a military one and when the soldier handed her mother the folded American flag I sat over there and cried.

With the premature passing of Eric I was in tears the moment I came in the church. I was questioning God on this one. I stood in the line to hug Laurie and felt sorry that I was going to be so emotional. You see, Laurie presents a picture to the world of a faith-

filled woman trusting in God no matter what. Now I don't know the words she has with God in private, but let me tell you on the day of Eric's service Laurie Geiger was offering me Christ.

As a matter of fact, for no reason that I can give you, as I drove home from the church I had an epiphany about something that had happened in my professional life eight years earlier which still caused me bitter memories. Because of Laurie's acceptance of her circumstances I finally was able to understand what a blessing that event in my life actually turned out to be.

Offering Christ. We have to figure out how each of us can do this. Thad Aycock, Merle's husband, was one of two people I know who had no trouble evangelizing. Thad would sit in a breakfast restaurant and suggest to a fellow patron, "Let me tell you about my church." Another man I know is called to ask strangers if they know Jesus and then give them a prayer card that he carries.

On the UMC website on a page called "See All The People" we are told, "The most essential step for making disciples of Jesus Christ is to immerse ourselves in the lives of the people who are right outside our doors, acknowledging that God calls us to have meaningful relationships in authentic, organic and consistent ways."

Over the last few years I have felt called to do many things in the church. What resonates with me from John Wesley is his idea of offering Christ by putting our faith and love into action. I talk to a great many people. No one here should be surprised by that statement. A while back I shared all my elementary school report cards during a Children's Sermon. I was a straight A student. I was elected class president many times. And I had in my eight years more checks for talking than this entire congregation has collectively.

Neil Vermillion who is a social media spiritual commentator has said, "Use your mouth as an agent of light & life. Always speak good things to/about people. Speak life, even if you're the only one doing so." I see that statement as lining up perfectly with John Wesley's charge to put faith and love into action.

I have told people in the Adult Sunday School class and I have written articles for the newsletter about my personal evangelism strategy of speaking casually and positively about my involvement with the church. Most everyone with whom I engage soon understands that I'm a church-goer and an enthusiastic believer in doing the best thing.

I also told you in March, during National Women's History Month, how I've befriended the Chase Banker Boys at my Jewel branch. A few months ago they hired a 20-year-old young woman and she became part of my pack. Over the last several months one of the men was agitated with the ups and downs of purchasing a house and moving his family into a new school district. I listened and commiserated and when the sale finally went through I bought him his first housewarming plant.

I was there when one of the young men broke up with his long-time girlfriend. Having seen more life than he, I told him he would get through this pain but he could take all the time he needed. By the end of a week I was able to make him laugh again.

The young woman is Romanian, attends a Romanian church, and is on the Education Committee. She told me that no one on the committee will listen to her suggestions. Well now! Imagine me rolling up my sleeves and telling her just how to be heard on church committees!

She is the one who asked us to pray for the 5-month-old Romanian baby who was diagnosed with a brain tumor. She says the child is on all the Romanian prayer lists but was reminded that we have a prayer list...that's from me talking. She told the Romanian social media site that the child is also on a United Methodist prayer list. Offering Christ.

The most serious conversation that I had was with one of the men who is an American-born Mexican. He has a Hispanic first name and told me that some people will say to him that he doesn't look like a \_\_\_\_\_. He also mentioned that his little daughter asked why

her skin is slightly brown. In truth this young man is lighter-skinned than I am. He was saddened by the discrimination he sometimes feels. I suggested to him that many people need to slot others into stereotypical categories so that they feel comfortable with what they have known.

I told him that my father was Jewish and had what was called olive skin. He was much darker-skinned than the young man. My father was one of six children who grew up in Queens, New York. His mother died when he was ten leaving his father to raise the family while trying to earn a living during the Depression.

The only thing my father knew about being Jewish was some wonderful food (which my mother subsequently learned to prepare) and the discrimination that was rampant against Jews in our country. My father was a gentle man and never fought back, but God gave my father my mother...a woman who never met a fight she didn't enjoy.

She was Irish and German and her favorite ploy was to let some worker or salesman or neighbor start denigrating the Jews and then she would say, "My Husband Is Jewish!" Kaboom. Direct hit.

I was also able to share with him that I believed that the reason God put me in an elementary school to teach instead of in a high school for which I had trained was for one sole purpose. I taught mostly black and Hispanic children, but there were a few white children over the years. One year a third grade boy who was as white as snow with blonde hair was a part of the class. He had the same birthmark that I have. It's called Port-Wine Stain (Nevus Flammeus). It most often appears on the face or on the limbs. He had it on both arms and was the object of all kinds of mean teasing. There are many forms of discrimination.

My birthmark is a huge mark on my upper chest and the back of my arm. Parts of it can be seen depending on the clothes I wear. Never before did this child have a teacher with the same condition that he had. I was very casual about telling him about my birthmark. His relaxation was obvious.

When the Jewel branch of the Chase Bank closed at the beginning of October my posse gave me these earrings because they said I was caring. Never ever do I do anything with an expectation of repayment. I was simply offering Christ in my own way.

When I preach I am always preaching to myself first. As I prepared for this message I was fully convinced that I had to offer Christ to me even as I offered Him to others. I am moving along the Spiritual Path but I have a long way to go. I don't read enough scripture to strengthen my approach to life. I was so grateful for Paul's sermon last week. He had all that great advice and wonderful scriptures about not worrying.

I could have used that sermon on the Friday before his talk. On that day I received a letter from Jesse White, Secretary of State. I immediately said, "What now!" As I walked to my door I'm thinking, "I passed the emission test. I have my sticker on my license plate. I'm not hiding from the police any more. I got my brake lights fixed. Is it another jury duty summons? I hope it's a jury duty summons because I don't have to go any more." I get in the house and open the envelope before I take off my coat. It says, "Congratulations! You are such a safe driver you can renew your driver's license on line."

OK. I didn't even realize that it was time to renew my driver's license. I missed several weeks of kvetching over that. Paul told us "Rejoice in the Lord always," but as I've declared many times, God's people are flawed. And I'm the leader of the pack."

Now, let's talk Cub Scouts. You all know that I have my own personal Cub Scout—Andrew. I am fully committed to purchasing popcorn from him. A couple of packs started selling before Andrew's pack. A few weeks ago as I was walking through the parking lot of a store I could see a Scout table set up outside the doors. Planted directly in front of me on the sidewalk ready to sales-pitch me was a little Cub Scout. I thought, "OK. I'll buy popcorn from this one and still buy popcorn from Andrew when he starts selling. I bought it and then gave it to a man I know who has four kids.

A week later as I was driving into the parking lot of the store I see another Scout table set up outside the doors. Ha! I thought. I'll drive down to the other doors. Well, there they were at that entrance, too. As I was walking from my car I was planning to tell them, "I'm sorry. I bought from a Scout last week and I have a Scout to buy from at my church." Then I was reminded of a verse from Rudyard Kipling's famous poem, "If":

*If you can make one heap of all your winnings  
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,  
And lose, and start again at your beginnings  
And never breathe a word about your loss;*

And yes, I know the poem ends with "you'll be a Man, my son!" However, I'm sure that Kipling meant to include "you'll be a Strong Woman, my daughter!" The point is that buying one more box of popcorn wasn't going to cut into my rent money and if I didn't spend it on the Cub Scouts I was going to spend it on something else transitory, so I decided not to count the cost. Offering Christ.

Finally, we have to review what happened when our missionaries from South Africa came to town. Abby Sauer Hunt gave the message. She mentioned that Jeff was driving around town listening to the news on the radio and it was as negative about their community as it is negative in America. As Jeff despaired he felt that he received a call from God who asked, "What are you going to do about it?"

Abby referenced Ezekiel 22:30. The Lord said that as the people continued to sin against Him and he planned to destroy Jerusalem he was looking for someone to stand in the gap of the crumbling wall of obedience...and he found no one. Abby talked about standing in the gap with prayer. I sat up a little straighter. This appealed to me. I was going to research this approach.

I'm reading a book on prayer and that night, the night of the same day that Abby Hunt spoke, the paragraph in my book was on standing in the gap! In my whole life I have probably not read from



Ezekiel even once, and I've never heard the phrase "standing in the gap," and now twice in the same day! OK, God you got my attention.

I did research the concept and the idea is to pray for places and situations that are affecting people. I most often pray for others and myself about what is troubling us. I have a whole new project now of standing in the gap.

All of these personal anecdotes about offering Christ are meant to reinforce the idea that there are many ways to put faith and love into action. Do not be daunted by anyone else's preference. At the last church I attended I was teaching Adult Sunday School and one of the older men said, "People are watching you." I don't think he meant people were watching me personally as in my favorite Facebook meme: *I was told I was pretty today. The actual sentence was you're pretty annoying, but I like to stay positive.* I believe he meant that when people find out you go to church they watch you to see if you are sincere.

I leave you with this: choose a way that you would like to offer Christ to others and just do it. As always if you need to flesh it out see Reverend Moon or his Lay Leader. Then as Imagine Dragons declare in their great song, do "Whatever It Takes."