



## **“Moving From Words to Witness”**

*John 1:1-18*

**Julie R. Harley – First United Church of Oak Park – January 3, 2010**

When I meet with couples for premarital counseling, there is one assignment that often opens up new lines of communication. I invite each person to write a list of three wishes they have for their partner.

Then I ask them to share those wishes, one at a time, each person taking a turn.

One man wishes that his fiancée would eat more. He wants her to know that he loves her no matter how much she weighs.

One woman wishes that her fiancé would stop yelling when he drives, because his road rage is frightening. She wants to feel safety and security when they are traveling together, but she finds it hard to say this.

One man wishes that his partner would be more affectionate, because the physical connection of intimacy is an important way for him to show his love. He feels that hugs and kisses mean more than words.

One woman wishes her partner would spend less time at work and more time at home with her. She admires her partner’s ambition, but wants to claim her need for time together.

Expressing our wishes for the people we love helps us to become closer. It’s a positive way to express your hopes for the future.

Making a wish is different than criticism. A wish simply means that you would like to see your daily life together be more fulfilling. Sharing a wish for your partner

shows you want them to be happy, and you have a specific suggestion about how to get there. I encourage you to try it yourself, with the people you love.

This same principle applies in other kinds of relationships.

When I listen to the first chapter of John's gospel, those words speak to me of God's three wishes for humanity.

**God's first wish is simply to be understood, to be known fully by us.**

After speaking for generations through prophets and kings, God decided that words were no longer enough. God took the risk of becoming human, to be fully revealed in Jesus Christ. God wanted to get through to us in a way we could not ignore.

This is the miracle of Christmas: that God became one of us.

For centuries no person could speak the name of God and live. Then God came to visit as a member of the human family, and people called him Jesus.

Millennia passed when no person could see the face of God, and then all people were invited to see God in the man Jesus.

In Jesus, God moved from words to witness. In Jesus God became visible, in order to be fully known.

This movement from words to actions is harder than it sounds. Most of us have made New Year's resolutions with all the best intentions in the world, but after a few weeks we simply give up. While a new goal may seem like a great idea, we often lack the willpower and the support to make it happen. Thinking about losing 10 pounds and talking about wanting to lose 10 pounds is a lot different than taking action to change our eating and exercise habits.

The same principle holds true for our faith. We may wish to feel a greater sense of God's presence and guidance in our daily life. But many things hold us back.

We're afraid of being labeled a religious wacko – we don't want to be confused with those Christians who use Jesus' name to oppress and exclude others or to preserve their own privilege.

We're afraid of letting go of control, because we're accustomed to knowing and deciding everything by our own power. Asking God to be in charge of our lives may feel strange.

We think if we join a Bible study or a spiritual guidance group, others will see how little we know about faith and we'll look dumb.

There is always a risk in moving from words to witness. But the reward is huge.

God took a risk in becoming human, and the reward is that God is no longer an abstract concept of divinity to us. God has come to our level, has lived in the very flesh we share, in a life that we can understand. Through Jesus, we have a new glimpse of God's amazing grace.

In the incarnation of Jesus Christ, God says, "Please understand who I am and what I want for you." This is God's first wish for us.

**God's second wish is to understand us, to share in what it means to be human, so that God can help us through our struggles.**

In choosing to be born poor, into an obscure peasant family, to live life as a Jew in a world that hated Jews, God faced the hardships of human life.

Through Jesus, God learned what it is to be misunderstood, to encounter opposition, to know physical exhaustion and spiritual testing. He faced temptations to abandon his mission. He died a painful death, surrounded by enemies.

Perhaps this was the only way God could truly understand what we need. God can help us through any crisis, because Jesus experienced every challenge that we do.

One day a man walked into the reception area of a drug and alcohol rehabilitation center. He was shouting profanities and carrying a baseball bat. He began to bang the bat on the desk of the secretaries and admitting staff. They jumped back and tried to get as far away from him as possible. One staff member ran into the back room and called the police.

Suddenly an older woman who was the director of the center appeared. She walked right up to the screaming man waving the bat. She ducked under his swing and wrapped her arms around his chest. In a heartfelt tone, she repeated over and over again,

“Oh, you poor man! Oh, you poor man!” They stood together for awhile in a strange embrace, and then the man began to sob. The director led him to a chair. He slumped into it and waited for the police. He never let go of the baseball bat.

We are disarmed by genuine compassion, because it sees our need to feel powerful and valued. Real compassion sees what lies behind our screw-ups.

In our vision conversations during the last four months, we heard over and over again that our members are seeking deeper connections with one another. In our highly individualistic culture, where many of us live a long distance from our family members, we are starving for closeness and compassion.

If we want to achieve that, we will need to spend more time together. We will need to show concern for one another, we will need to reveal our vulnerabilities, we will need to reach out – not knowing how we will be received.

There is a deep wish among our members that this faith community would be a nurturing quilt of love for those who are wounded, alone and in need of healing and hope.

In Jesus, God walked with us. God knows exactly what it is like to be human. God reaches out to us, holding us in everlasting arms, to help us through our struggles.

**God’s third wish is that we would no longer feel a separation between heaven and earth, but instead that we would see the world with no boundaries between spirit and flesh.**

In the ancient world, God was seen as transcendent – above and apart from human life. God would occasionally appear on earth in miraculous theophanies: a burning bush; a plague; a pillar of fire and smoke. God’s presence was confined in the Temple to the Holy of Holies, a place which could only be entered by a select number of priests on ritual days.

But when God became human, God took residence in the world in a radically new way. No longer high above it all, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Through Jesus, God became imminent. We have the privilege of seeing God.

When the veil of the Temple was torn in two during the hour of Christ’s crucifixion, Jesus shattered the boundaries between heaven and earth. Jesus opened the

doorway to the sacred. There is no longer any separation between God and humankind. Now we can see the world as God sees it.

In the story of Camelot, the young Arthur receives training from the magician Merlin before he becomes king. One day, Merlin takes Arthur into the forest, turns him into a hawk, and sends him sailing into the sky. From the earth, Merlin shouts to Arthur, “What do you see?”

Arthur shouts back, “I see rivers and trees.”

“No,” the irritated Merlin responds. “What do you see?”

“I see cattle and sheep and . . .

“No,” Merlin interrupts the boy. A third time he asks, “What do you see?”

“I see villages and . . . “

“Come down,” orders Merlin. Arthur, still a hawk, returns to earth, and becomes Arthur the young boy.

“Some day,” Merlin says, “you will know what you saw.”

Eventually, when Arthur grows up and becomes king, he learns a new way of seeing: a vision of the world with no boundaries. He learns to see the world as one creation, one unity . . . to see the whole, rather than the parts.

John’s gospel gives us the ability to see the birth of Christ as part of the unity of heaven and earth. No boundaries. In the beginning, before the dawn of Creation, Christ was. Christ was in the beginning, with God, one with God.

Christ was there at Creation, when all things were made.

He moved from Word to witness, as he came into the world – to be a light in the darkness.

And finally Christ became one with the community of those who received him.

Christ shattered the boundaries. The Word who was there before time is now present in time, in this place, in this moment, and in the sacrament of communion we will share in a few minutes.

For the last two years, our wildly important goal at First United has been to create and sustain a spiritual framework for our ministries. That means connecting everything we do to God's desire for us.

When we have a Council meeting, we look at the big picture of what God is seeking to do through us. When we teach a Church School class, we want our children to see how God is at work in the world today – not just what God did in the past. When we develop a vision of the next 10 years of our life together, we believe that should be guided by prayer and discernment – not just our own opinions and preferences.

Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of God's three wishes for us:

- 1. That we would know God.**
- 2. That God would know us.**
- 3. That there would be no separation between heaven and earth.**

God's dream became real in Jesus. And God's dream continues to become real through this community of believers, in love that moves beyond words to witness.

Only one question remains: What are our three wishes for God? Amen.

