

February 5, 2006

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MERIDIAN STREET UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Talk of the Town

John 4:4-30

I am not a big Country Western Music Fan. However, I do have a few favorite country songs. One of those songs is sung by Bonnie Raitt. You may remember it from the movie with the same title starring Julia Roberts and Dennis Quaid, "Something to Talk About." I enjoyed the movie because it has beautiful horses in it and of course, the beautiful Dennis Quaid. But it is the theme song that really stuck with me. These are the words of the chorus:

Let's give them something to talk about...

Let's give them something to talk about...

Let's give them something to talk about...

How about love

Since the beginning of its time, the church has been giving people plenty to talk about! We Christians have given more than enough fodder to fuel wagging tongues. I am sure you can all immediately think of something that spread like wildfire about "the church" at one time or another.

I hate to pick on us as Christians, but you know as well as I do that Christians often bring a shrill, negative voice to the culture. Christian communities often get focused on God's judgment, God's vengeance and who is not worthy of God's grace. Scandals in churches having to do with abuse of children, embezzling funds, sexual misconduct, and so much more are in the news all the time. Don't even get me started on the crusades or the burning of witches.

More recently, United Methodists have been the talk as a pastor in Virginia withheld church membership to a man in the Choir because he is gay. Not only is his town in Virginia talking, but communities all over the country have been talking about that one. You may instantly see the paradox of that action and our denominational philosophy – open hearts, open minds, open doors.

"Let's give them something to talk about..." the Christian community has done that in a multitude of ways over the centuries.

I remind you of a day in Samaria about two thousand years ago when the whole town starts talking.

Jesus, a devout Jew, speaks to a woman from Samaria in broad daylight. This is a scandal! This is unclean behavior on Jesus' part. His handlers, the disciples, were nowhere to be found, and Jesus goes off yet again and causes a scene. The woman herself is aghast that this Jewish man would be talking to her in the middle of the day. Traditional theology says that the woman is out there in the middle of the day because very likely she is an outcast in her own community and she is surely on the list of "no good" in Jesus' community. No one talks to her in her own town, much less a traveling Jewish scholar, a Jewish Rabbi. Ultimately, the woman is surrounded by grace in a way she has never known. Jesus startles her with God's love.

Jesus spent his entire ministry giving people something to talk about. He inspires us, instructs us, encourages us and empowers us. He was forever reaching out in new ways to touch the lives of people that the vast majority had given up on long ago. Jesus is the talk of the town because he transformed lives. Jesus is the talk because he brings profound personal change in people. He has people talking because he offers God's grace/ God's love to the least likely people including people like you and me. Now that is something to talk about!

This is our moment in time, Meridian Street, this is our corner of the earth, Indianapolis, Indiana and this is our opportunity to give this town something to talk about...how about love!

We have the same ability this day, this week to startle people with God's love in this community. People have grown wary of the church in our own time – and for good reason. We all have friends and neighbors who wake up this morning having no idea that they are loved by God – not knowing that sincerely God cares for them at all. So many people in Indianapolis will start this day just like yesterday and tomorrow thinking, really believing that their life holds little meaning in the world. So many people in this city, just like the woman at the well, are going through the motions in life feeling rejected and alone.

Let's give them something to talk about Meridian Street. Let's speak of love and live out our love in such a way that we become a magnet for people in this community. Let's show them the power of God's love in our lives. Let's speak openly about the joy of living in God's grace. Let's share the wonder of knowing that we are loved beyond measure, not for what we do, but for the very fact that we are. It is time to allow the spirit of God to move through us in very visible ways!

In a culture of Christianity that seems so determined to place limits on God's love, let's show this city that God's love is available to all and just like Jesus, let's startle people with that divine love so that open hearts, open minds, open doors is not just a slogan, but a reality.

He has been called an American Prophet. He served as the chaplain at Yale University and the Senior Pastor of the Riverside Church in New York City. Rev. Dr. William Sloane Coffin has put together a compilation of wisdom from his sermons in a book entitled, *Credo*. He writes, "Too many religious people make faith their aim. They think, 'the greatest of these' is faith, and faith defined as all but infallible doctrine. These are the dogmatic, divisive Christians, more concerned with freezing the doctrine than warming the heart. If faith can be exclusive, love can only be inclusive."

Can you imagine the way the woman at the well felt that day? Talk about warming the heart. Her heart, her soul, her entire being was drenched in Divine Love and she could not keep that a secret. She raced back into the town and gave everyone who would listen something to talk about. Here she was an outcast, the one everyone shunned, the woman you would cross to the other side of the road to avoid getting too close, to this one came unconditional, unimaginable, transforming love.

I have come to believe over the years, that the Christian community would rather remain on the backside of the cross. Living out our lives as a people redeemed is just too frightening. We would rather hang in the shadows of guilt and judgment than live out our reality on the Resurrection side of the cross. As an extended family of Christians, we would rather focus on the issues that divide us, than pool our energy and resources to address the challenges that we could really impact with grace. We would rather spend decades of our precious energy arguing about who is not fit for the

grace of God than be bearers of God's grace. As long as we can remain focused on judgment, we do not have to really live out the essence of our faith. In so doing, we are missing out on the joy of living a life that is already blessed, already forgiven, already divinely empowered.

It was the great theologian Nietzsche who is credited with saying, "Christians should look more redeemed." Sharing the Divine love that lives within us and surrounds us brings that look of redemption. We can find plenty to talk about from communities of faith that operate out of guilt and oppression, but our relationship with the love of God brings us joy, brings us hope, brings us laughter, brings us energy, brings us vision, brings us abundant life. When we allow the Divine love of God to shine through us we not only look redeemed, we feel redeemed and we share God's love with others. That is exactly what happened to that woman at the well. She ran back to town telling everyone she met along the way about her experience. She felt redeemed, she looked redeemed and she could not wait to share the news.

Divine love is already alive and well in our midst. Now it is up to us to get this community talking about and experiencing that very love. It is time for us to speak openly about this congregation in the wider community. You are a gifted, intelligent, loving community of faith. You provide critical ministry in this city and far beyond. Don't keep Meridian Street a secret. Start talking! We are living in a world desperate to be loved. At the core of most of our social issues is the truth that we do not love well as a society. This city and the world are in dire need of God's love and grace. Pick up any newspaper and realize that truth. You already walk the walk, but you are also called to talk the talk. We are empowered by God's spirit to embody love, to speak of the power of God's love in our lives often openly and live out that love in our own words and actions at home, at work and in our gifts of time and effort to the wider community. There was a scary statistic roaming around the denomination five or six years ago – did you know that the average United Methodist invites a friend to church once every fourteen years?

Let's give them something to talk about in Indianapolis, Indiana...how about love. Not sure where to start? The Interfaith Hospitality Network has been here all week. Many of you have participated by preparing meals, spending the night here at church, driving our guests this week. This is the perfect time for each one of us gathered here this morning to tell three or four people who do not go to this church about how we participate in this wonderful ministry to the homeless in our community. Let's give them something to talk about Meridian Street- let's talk about loving our neighbor in this way. Let's talk about not only helping to support this ministry financially, but that people from this faith community participate with their time and energy in making a meaningful connection to people that they might not otherwise know. And the blessing is love. Love to those who receive and love to those who give.

Let's give them something to talk about in this community, how about love. We have in this church children who face serious developmental challenges. We are family at Meridian Street. We have ministries designed to assist not only the children, but also their parents. Take the time to share about this powerful ministry with three or four people who are not a part of this community of faith, so that they too will know of the love in this congregation. Do not keep this ministry a secret. It is one of the many ways we startle this community with love.

You have plenty to talk about as Meridian Street has a variety of ministries for children, youth, adults, music, sports and mission. There is plenty to talk about when it comes to the love of the Divine in this congregation!

What a community of privilege we are – each one of us greets this day with the absolute assurance that we are loved, loved from the tips of our toes to the top of our heads. We are loved for who we are and who we are becoming. Loved not because of our family history, or our educational achievements, or our standing in the community, or our titles, or our address, or our mutual fund portfolio – we are loved because we are God’s own. Someone along the way invited us to know this love. Many of us are just like that woman at the well, startled by Divine love.

Several years ago, I heard this parable concerning the church. There was once a naturalist who went to visit a rancher about his land. While the naturalist and the rancher were talking, the naturalist realized that there was a young eagle scratching in the dirt in a pen filled with chickens. He asked, “Why do you have an eagle in with the chickens.” The rancher replied that he had found the eagle injured and abandoned and had brought him home and nursed him back to health. As he recovered, the eagle made his home with the chickens and now he thinks he is a chicken.” The naturalist was distressed to have this eagle living like a chicken. So, the story goes, the naturalist went into the chicken pen and lifted the eagle up onto his arm. The eagle looked up and around and then jumped down off the man’s arm and began to scratch in the dirt. Dismayed, but determined, the naturalist took the eagle out of the chicken pen and tried again, but the same thing happened, the eagle looked up and around and then jumped down to scratch and peck in the dirt. Undaunted, the naturalist asked the rancher if he could return the next day at dawn and try again. So, the next morning very early, the naturalist, the rancher and the eagle went to a high place on the ranch and the naturalist placed the eagle on his arm once again. The eagle looked up and looked around and began to feel the wind in his face. He lifted up his wings and began to flutter them and then as the sun began to rise, the eagle lifted off the man’s arm and hovered for a moment or two, gained his balance in the air and then began to soar.

The church is not called to scratch around in the dirt of judgment and negativity, the church is called to soar, empowered by God’s love.

Let’s give them something to talk about, Meridian Street. People in this city, like cities and towns all over America are dying to be startled by love. Meridian Street United Methodist Church is a faith community where we are not so concerned about freezing dogma to use to exclude, but rather living out Divine love that empowers us to include.

We are the beneficiaries of grace. This is our moment in time to share that grace and to set tongues wagging in positive ways in this town. Meridian Street. This is your time; this is your place to get this city talking about God’s love!

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