

Good morning! The Bishop's Message is delivered in two segments. There is a printed report that's has been posted online, and if you've not already done so I encourage you to spend some time reviewing that report. I'd like to spend my time this morning focusing on the theme of our Assembly – "Sharing in Hope: God's Story, Our Voices."

A couple of months ago a number of us were meeting in preparation for this assembly when someone looked at the registration numbers and said, "Gosh, there aren't as many registered for this assembly as there normally would be at this point in the process." And I said, "And what's the theme of this assembly?" "*Ohhhh, that's right!*"

Evangelism! That's our focus at this assembly, the mighty "E" word! To those of you brave souls not frightened off by the idea of sharing your faith, congratulations! We're glad you're here! To those of you who innocently signed up without knowing the theme and are now feeling trapped and doomed, relax. This won't hurt a bit. We're glad you're here too.

Evangelism is actually the fourth of four themes we've been exploring as a synod. First of all, we are who God has made us: Claimed in the waters of baptism by a God of abundant love and forgiveness and grace, we are people who live in HOPE: bright hope in the world to come, and profound hope as we live in this world, hope in a God who promises never to leave us but instead promises to live in the very midst of us.

We've been looking at our identity as people of hope in terms of leadership, stewardship, discipleship, and, now evangelism; or Lead, Give, Grow, and Share. Each theme is introduced at Synod Assembly in June, explored more deeply at Bishop's Convocation in the fall, and expanded upon during a series of area ministry visits. So now, beginning today and extending through the year until next June and our next synod assembly, our focus will be on evangelism, or Sharing in Hope.

At this point it will help to know what the data tell us about our synod, and this data is generated internally – it comes from you. Now, for the congregation members, those of us who are laypersons, here's a little insight into the unique joys of being a parish pastor. You might think that the part of the job of pastor that your pastor likes best is preaching, or maybe teaching, or maybe pastoral care. Not so. The favorite part of the job, the activity she or he looks forward to most, is *filling out the annual parochial report!* This is the document that lists a congregation's number of active members, baptized, confirmed, how much is contributed in mission support, and so on.

So here's our self-portrait. We are 167 organized congregations and eight Synodically Authorized Worshipping Communities and Congregations Under Development throughout Missouri and Kansas. Of that total, nearly half worship fewer than 50 on a weekend while six worship more than 350 on a weekend. We are also home to three campus ministry sites: University of Kansas, Lawrence; Kansas State University, Manhattan; and St. Louis Campus Ministry. We also support two outdoor ministry sites: Hollis Renewal Center in Bonner Springs, Kansas; and Camp Tomah Shinga, near Junction City, Kansas.

Many of our churches are in non-metropolitan areas, places that are losing population and other resources. In fact, our total number of congregations has declined by 12 over the last six years. So as a synod we reflect the nation-wide, cross-denominational trend downward that I mentioned last night.

I lay this information before you for one reason: it's true, and it's important that we're aware of and understand the cold, hard facts. But the data show only part of a larger truth, a

truth that has nothing to do with numbers. If we draw our confidence from numbers we draw our confidence from an altogether wrong place, because numbers rise and fall, come and go. The church in Corinth was going great guns when Paul wrote to it back in the first century, and look at it now. Actually, you can't, because it's not there. It wasn't *supposed* to last forever. The point has never been for the church to measure success with the same metrics by which the world measures success – with numbers – but rather by the activity of the Holy Spirit as it does God's work among us and through us by inviting us more deeply into our story with God.

It is for the Spirit to stay active in our story; it is for us to take our place in that story and share it. But we don't do a very good job of preparing ourselves to share the story of God's ongoing activity with us. And years ago, as a parish pastor just starting out, I realized I was a big part of the problem.

As a fresh-faced seminary graduate I was called to a church that was brimming with possibilities. Worship attendance was booming, programming was humming along, the Spirit was alive and moving in the congregation. I had what I considered to be a brilliant idea. "Let's increase worship attendance even more, and we'll do it with something called 'Bring A Friend Sunday.'" The idea was simple: We would encourage every member to invite a friend to come to worship on a particular Sunday; the sanctuary would be packed to overflowing, we'd have inspiring worship, our membership rolls would grow by leaps and bounds.

So about six weeks before the big day we sent out letters encouraging members to invite a friend or two to worship, and we followed that letter up a couple of weeks later with reminder postcards. Our Fellowship Ministry got busy, and we were ready with more cookies and date bars than you can imagine.

Finally the big day came, I walked into the back of the sanctuary to begin the first service, and – the place was almost deserted! It was the lowest attendance in the history of the congregation! What had happened? Well, what had happened, of course, was that people were shy about asking their friends to come to church, and rather than show up empty-handed and be embarrassed about it, they hadn't shown up at all.

The lesson I learned about evangelism that day was pretty basic: Don't ask people to do something without first preparing them, in a variety of ways, for exactly that task. It is an obvious lesson, but one that congregations bypass all the time.

So it's worth thinking about just what evangelism is and what it isn't. For that there's no better guide than scripture. In the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew's gospel, John the Baptist has heard about the activities of the Messiah, and John sent his friends to Jesus to find out if Jesus was indeed that One, the promised Messiah. Jesus's response? He could have come up with something quite simple, like "Yes, I'm the One"; but instead he says this to John's friends: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor have good news brought to them."

"Go and tell what you hear and see." Jesus doesn't say, "Hell or Heaven: Choose Wisely." Or "For Me or Against Me? Against Me? There's Hell to Pay." Or, "Avoid Hell. Trust Jesus Today." Those are all actual highway billboards, by the way. No, Jesus simply says go and tell of your experience. That's it. His instruction is really the ancient root of author Leif Enger's description of "witness": telling people, "Here's what I experienced, here's how it went, make of it what you will."

That's an excellent definition of evangelism: telling people "here's what I experienced, here's how it went, make of it what you will." No coercion, nothing heavy-handed, not based on results, or on how the other person receives our comments; only accepting our responsibility to

tell what we've experienced of God's activity in our lives and in the world in and through Jesus Christ.

By the way, that simple definition will work well for those congregations who are trying to bring people of the Millennial Generation into their churches. That's the big question these days, isn't it: How Do We Get The Millennials? If that's your church, if you're wondering how to fill your pews with Millennials, here's a tip: Stop hunting them. They're not trophies. They're people, looking for a truer, more authentic Christianity than they've found so far. Research shows that they're turned off by slick, shallow expressions of Christianity and by the marketing of Jesus and turned on by churches that provide the opportunity to actually *follow* Jesus. Often times, that act of following has its origin in the simple act of witnessing, of one person telling another person "here's what I experienced, here's how it went, make of it what you will."

That activity, of being a witness, is part and parcel of the call you and I receive in our baptism. When we bring infants to receive that sacrament, we parents and sponsors promise to bring them up in the faith so that, among other things, they may "proclaim Christ through word and deed." When we adults affirm our baptism we announce that we intend to continue in the covenant God made with us in baptism, to, among other things, "proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed." As people who have been baptized into the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, we bear a new call, a new identity, and witnessing is a basic element of that call and identity.

But wait, you say. "I don't *do* witnessing. What others believe is none of my business, and what I believe is none of theirs. I keep it to myself and I expect other people to do the same; but what I *don't* do is shove my beliefs down other people's throats." Well, good, because that's not witnessing. A witness is simply someone who says, "Here's what I experienced, here's how it went, make of it what you will." With that definition in mind, we all are witnesses.

And here's the thing: we witness all the time.

For example, let's have a show of hands. In addition to myself, how many have downloaded to your phone the app for the game HQ? For those of you who don't know, this is a live trivia game that's played twice a day, at 2 p.m. and 8 p.m., and features about 12 questions, moving from very easy to extremely difficult; its audience is worldwide and averages well over a million players. At exactly 2 and 8, a host comes on, goes through a silly intro, then starts the questions. You get 10 seconds to answer each question. When you get one wrong, you're out of the game. Those who make it all the way through split a pot that varies from a few hundred dollars to well over a million. It's a fun game.

I heard about it from my spouse, who heard about it from a friend, who told her, "You've got to try this, it's awesome!!!" Which is what she then told me. OK, so I downloaded the app and now I sometimes join the game. And why? Because of someone who told someone who told someone who told me. And now I've told you. You might download the app and play the game or you might not. Totally up to you. But what has happened in the course of talking about the game is witnessing.

We witness all the time. We watch a Royals game or a Cardinals game and we talk about it with our co-workers. We observe the political scene and talk about it with our friends. We see a terrific movie and talk about it with our significant other. None of these events is particularly earth-shaking or important; they're just the stuff of everyday life that we find interesting and want to share with those people who populate our lives. The name for all of that is witnessing.

So if we find it so natural to talk about the window-dressing issues and events of our lives, how much more natural should it be for us to talk about the *essential* components of our lives, like our faith?

Maybe we don't do it because talking about our faith isn't anything like debriefing a baseball game. When we talk about the game we talk about the score, we talk about the players, Royals fans might talk about how they wish Hosmer was back, and so on. Nothing mysterious there. But in the life of faith there's *considerable* mystery, uncertainty, unpredictability. Again, Scripture is our guide. In Luke's Gospel Jesus appears to his disciples after the Resurrection, and Luke's description of their response rings absolutely true: "*in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering ...*."

Even those who had a first-hand experience of the Resurrected Jesus had a hard time believing it, making sense of it, understanding it. But it is precisely to these bewildered people Jesus patiently opened the Scriptures so they could see how what they had just experienced fit into God's larger story of salvation. And he ends his time with them by affirming to them, "You are witnesses of these things." He commissions them, imperfect though their witnessing might be, wanting them to be concerned not with getting it "right" but with keeping it real.

Several weeks ago, in preparation for this assembly, I sent each of our voting members some questions that I said we would address during our time together, and we're going to take a few minutes now to do just that. Here are those questions again: How has your faith remained constant through the years, and how has it changed you? And, where have you seen God active recently?

Let me start things off. I inherited the Christian faith. My dad was Methodist, my mother Roman Catholic; they thought Lutheran was a good middle ground. So I grew up in a household where we went to church every Sunday and rarely talked, or I guess really thought, much about God the rest of the week. Never came up. So, in a way, faith was a pool that I swam in without really getting wet.

But I began to truly own my faith when I experienced the baptism of my son. There we were, in a church in central Illinois, standing around the baptismal font, pastor, parents, sponsors. I was holding 2-month-old Andy and, at the appropriate time, handed him to the pastor. The pastor received him, leaned slightly over the font, cupped his hand into the water and then poured the water over Andy's head with the words, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

The word "bittersweet" was created for just that moment. I realized in an instant that I was giving up my son; he wasn't just mine anymore. But I also realized I was giving him up to a God of unconditional love who would care for him in an eternal future. I can trace the beginning of my adult faith to that very moment. It changed me, because it gave me new lenses, a new way of looking not only at my son's life and my own life but at the world at large.

OK, your turn. We intentionally mixed up the seating arrangement this morning with this time in mind, so that you should be sitting with people you either don't know or hopefully don't know very well. So please take a few minutes now, turn to the person next to you, either right or left, you pick, and share your thoughts about at least one of these questions that, hopefully, you've been thinking about in advance of this assembly. Let's take five minutes for each speaker, then switch. I'll be the timekeeper and let you know when it's time for speakers and listeners to switch roles. Again, the questions, which we'll leave on the screen: How has your

faith remained constant through the years, and how has it changed you? And, where have you seen God active recently?

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Let's convene again, everyone at your table gathering as a group. There is one facilitator at each table, and I'd like that person to help the conversation along, giving each person a chance to speak, as you debrief the experience you just had: What was it like to actually talk about your faith and to share that faith with another? We'll take 10 minutes for this one, one minute for each speaker.

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All right, we're back as a whole group. Thank you for participating. Hopefully this exercise hasn't been painful at all for you but energizing. We believe in a very active God, after all. Imagine the impact we could have if each of the congregations represented here were to take five minutes at the beginning of each worship service for something like "God Sightings," brief observations by members of where they had seen God active in the world during the last week. The goal would be to make that kind of observation – call it witnessing – increasingly normal and a part of the congregation's everyday life. This is a way we can train ourselves to see the world differently – as God's earthly realm – so that we can act in it increasingly as people of faith.

I commend that practice to you as a very practical way of becoming increasingly familiar and at ease with making faith talk a very normal, basic part of our everyday speech.

In his book, Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian, author Tom Long reflects on a dinner party he attended in Washington, D.C. The guest of honor was a prominent church leader from an Eastern European country that had been under Soviet domination. The citizens of that country were demanding democratic reforms, but the government wasn't giving up its rigid control easily.

The church leader talked about the strong faith and commitment of Christians in his country, but he also talked about the fear of being watched and under suspicion in a society under tight government control. He said, "Secret agents from the government infiltrated the church. We would go to church meetings and know that some of the pastors present were really agents posing as clergy, listening to what we said, reporting everything. There were spies in our midst."

"Spies," someone asked, "posing as clergy?"

"Yes," the church leader said, "but of course, we knew who they were."

"Knew who they were?" someone asked. "But I thought they were secret agents."

"Oh, they were," he said, "but we could tell. There was something in their voice that gave them away."

Something in their voice. There is something about people's voices that reveal a deeper truth about them. I think that's what Jesus was getting at when he said he was the Good Shepherd and that his sheep know his voice. A person's voice – *what* a person talks about, *how* they talk about it, the sound of the voice itself – all display the truth of a person.

Does the world know us by the sound of our voices? If secret agents can infiltrate society on behalf of fear and control, we can infiltrate the world on behalf of faith, hope, and love. Let the world say about us Christians, “We could tell who they were. There was something in their voice that gave them away.”

May it be so among us.

Thank you.