

Partner with the Holy Spirit

Intro:

- It was a lovely summer day in London, England.
- I was sitting at an outdoor pub on a canal with my friend Jonny, and we were catching up, like old friends do.
- The place was packed out and noisy.
- Our server was waiting on a number of tables, and honestly, I didn't pay much attention to her. But Jonny did. And when she came to take our order, he said, "I'm a Christian. And there's something I believe God wants you to know," and he gave her a word he felt was from the Holy Spirit.
- He was gentle and kind, but I was immediately anxious — "Jonny, this is London, one of the most secular cities in the world; this is *not* going to end well."
- But to my surprise: she began to cry.
- Without betraying her privacy, God was at work in her life.
- Jonny asked if he could pray for her. She said yes, and it turned into a profound moment.
- In hindsight: I was totally unaware (just trying to decide on which salad to order for lunch), but God was active all around me ...

Recap:

- We are working through four key movements to the Practice of Witness.
- They are:
 - Begin with love
 - Practice hospitality

- Partner with the Holy Spirit
- And share the good news
- Up for today's session is: partner with the Holy Spirit

Evangelism:

- I have a few friends like Jonny, who, whenever we go out for coffee or a meal, they strike up conversations with random people, and ask, "Can I pray for you?" They have a remarkable ability to make new friends and tell others about Jesus.
- My wife is like this: She *loves* talking to uber drivers, and getting coffee with gym mates, and bringing up Jesus in conversation.
- It's beautiful.
- Some of you are wired by God for this Practice; it's like your unique contribution to the kingdom.
- But for 95% of us ... this Practice is really scary ...
- Witness is a *weakness*, not a strength in my apprenticeship to Jesus.
- We all have upstream practices and downstream practices:
 - Downstream meaning they just flow naturally from us, they are easy and joy-giving.
 - And upstream meaning, they feel a bit against our nature, more of a discipline.
 - And actually, both types of practices play a key role in our formation.
 - Witness is an upstream practice for me.
- If the same is true for you, you are not alone.
- It brings up so many fears ...
 - What if I accidentally mess it up?
 - What if people think I'm crazy?
 - What if they ask about _____?
 - I don't know what to say.
 - My life is far from perfect.

- I'm shy.
- I'm not good at this.
- Fear after fear.

Seam: But here's what I've realized: one of the reasons a lot of us are scared of witness is because we start from a false assumption: that we need to bring God to people.

Two assumptions:

- This can make it feel like it's all on *us* to share the gospel and convince people to become Christians.
- That's a lot of pressure.
- But what if we started with the opposite assumption?
- That there is nowhere God is not, and no *when* God is not; that God pervades all of time and space, and *that God is love*, that "he so loved the world he gave his one and only Son." (John 3v16) And he is actively drawing people to his Son, right now.
- In Session 01, we mapped out five thresholds people have to cross to come to Jesus ...
- What if God is working in the lives of each and every person we know, gently guiding them to the next stage in their spiritual journey?
- What if our role is less to bring God *to* people, and more to *join* God in what he is *already* doing.

Join in:

- Darrell Johnson from Regent College has this great line: "Evangelism is joining a conversation the Holy Spirit is already having with another person."
- When you sit across from someone on the bus, or stand in line behind someone at a coffee shop, or order lunch from a server at a pub: God is at work in their lives.
- I just read the testimony of a woman from London who came to faith late in life through Alpha. In reflection, she said, "It [was] like meeting the person who was looking after me all along." [Judy Cahusac]
- Meaning: looking back over her life, she could see, "Oh, God was at work here in my story, and here, and here ... gently leading me to himself."

- What if this is what God is doing in *all* our friends and family who do not yet know God?
- When this clicks, it changes everything.
- Instead of witness being this really heavy or scary thing that we force ourselves to do to be “a good Christian,” it becomes a whole new way of *being* in the world — learning to live with eyes wide open, looking for where the Father is already at work, and just making ourselves available for his plans and purposes.
 - I was listening to a pastor’s story recently of doing a training for chaplaincy, to go into hospitals and such.
 - He said, at first, he was so intimidated to walk into a hospital room. Until he realized: *God was already in the room.* At work. His job was just to calm his central nervous system, so he could go in grounded, at peace, and just have eyes to see where God was already working.
- It’s very similar with Witness: when we realize; God is already at work, our job becomes slowing down and *seeing* where the Father is working, so we can join in.

Seam: Let me show you one example of this pattern ...

Turn: Turn in your Bibles to Acts 8 ...

- This story we’re about to read is about an early apprentice to Jesus named Philip.
- Let’s pick it up in verse 26 ...
- Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road — the desert road — that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (Acts 8v26)
 - We don’t know where, or when ... we just know God spoke to Philip and said, “Go south to the road to Gaza.” He doesn’t even tell him what to do there, just go ...
- So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means “queen of the Ethiopians”) ... (Acts 8v27)
 - Meaning, he was a high-ranking political leader in the Ethiopian government.
- This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship,
 - Meaning: he has some knowledge of the God of the Hebrew people, and a draw in his heart.

- Translation: God is already at work in this man ... from another culture, from another people group; God is drawing the man to himself ...
- and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.” (Acts 8v28-29)
 - Okay, next step: just walk alongside the chariot.
- Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked. (Acts 8v30)
 - Notice: Philip starts by asking a question ...
- “How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. (Acts 8v31)
 - Notice that as the conversation continues, Philip isn’t forcing a moment; he’s just saying yes to the invitations ...
- This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading: “He was led like a lamb to the slaughter ...”
 - This is from Isaiah 53, which is the most poignant Messianic prophecies of Jesus in all of the Hebrew Bible.
 - What a “coincidence.”
 - Look down at 34 ...
- The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. (Acts 8v34-35)
 - The word there is *euangelion* — the word translated “gospel” or “good news”!
- As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?” And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. (Acts 8v36-39)
- Four steps.
- This is a stunning story of a man coming to trust in Jesus.
- In fact, church tradition dating all the way back names him as the founder of the Orthodox

Tewahedo [“Tuh-weh-heh-dough”] Church church in Ethiopia — one of the oldest churches in the world.

- And it only happened because of a partnership between Philip and the Holy Spirit.
- And while this story is not a step-by-step formula for Witness, it does give us a paradigm for how to partner with the Holy Spirit.
- You could extrapolate out of the story four movements:
 1. Listen
 2. Look
 3. Ask
 4. Risk
- First ...

1. Listen

- The story begins with God speaking to Philip a word of direction: “Go south to the road.”
- We don’t know the details: Was this during morning prayer? Or in a dream in the middle of the night? Or just while he was going about his day?
- All we know is: Philip was listening.
- A core facet of being a disciple of Jesus is spending time quietly listening for his voice.
- Saying, God, speak to me, direct my steps; I make myself available for your plans and purposes.
- I try to end my morning quiet time by just listening. I close my Bible, and I just open my mind and heart to God, trusting that the Holy Spirit has direct access to my imagination, and he can implant thoughts or feelings or pictures or sensations into my body itself.
- I continue to be surprised at how often what comes to mind is a small act of love. Rarely grandiose. Normally it’s just a soft prompting to text a person, or buy someone flowers, or write a short note, or just take a small step ...
- I don’t always know if those promptings are always from God or not, but I do know that listening is at the heart of apprenticeship to Jesus.
- And as I go throughout my day, I want to continue to listen: God, what are you doing right now? How do I join in?

- Then, secondly ...

2. Look

- Philip goes to the road. No idea what God has for him there! God just drips the next step to him (“Go to the road”), then the next: “Go to *that* chariot and stay near it.”
- Each time, do this small act, then wait for me to move.
- It’s like Philip is just following a trail of breadcrumbs ...
- And that’s so often what following Jesus feels like, just following a series of small next steps.
- But this requires us to learn to really see where God is at work.
- Jesus had this remarkable ability to see people, to see who was in need, who was closed off, and who was primed and ready to receive the gift of the kingdom, what each person needed to hear ...
- So much of witness is about timing.
- We don’t know when people are right at that point where they are primed, like ripe fruit on a tree, just waiting for a gentle touch from God and his people ... but God knows all of that.
- And often, he will give us his eyes to see by the Spirit.
- This may look like a flash of insight about someone we can’t shake, or a prompting from the Spirit to say a particular thing, or it may just look like paying attention, really listening, and noticing when a person is open, or hurting, or in need of a friend.
- But for God to work through us in this way, we have to see: which means, we have to *slow down*, and put away our phones, and unhurry our bodies, and walk in the Spirit.
- This is really practical.
 - When you walk into a coffee shop ...
 - Or when you’re sitting with a friend ...
 - Or when you get a phone call from a family member ...
 - Just slow down, ask the Spirit: “God, what are you doing right now? Where are you at work? How can I join you?”
- Then, step three ...

3. Ask

- I love that Philip starts by asking a question.
- Asking questions is often the best way to *start* a conversation:
 - People love talking about themselves! You can ask about their job or kids or tattoos.
- Questions are the best way to move a conversation deeper:
 - Shallow conversations don't lead to God; but you can ask people about their pain, or beliefs about the meaning of life ...
- And questions are a way to test your discernment.
 - You may have a sense about someone ... God may speak a word to your heart ... but you don't *know for sure* if it's from God or just your own brain; one way to test it is to ask a question or two ...
- My friends who are really prophetic, when they have a sense about someone, will almost always start by asking a question.
- Learning to be a world-class question asker is an essential part of growing in our witness.
- But then, the final step is to...

3. Risk

- There comes a time when you just have to step out in faith and risk a moment.
- John Wimber of the Vineyard used to say, "Faith is spelled R-I-S-K."
 - There is a reciprocal relationship between our capacity for risk, and the stories we get to tell of God's power at work through our lives.
- But we have to step out.
- For Philip, it was explaining Isaiah 53 to the man and sharing the message of Jesus.
- It could be almost anything:
 - Asking to pray for a person — I remain shocked at how open people are, even in pluralistic, secular, hostile places like where I live, to receiving prayer; when it's done gently and respectfully and well, people often feel loved.
 - Or it could be making an invitation — to your table or home, to Alpha or your church or to have a conversation.

- Or it could be, like Philip, to help people understand the Scriptures, or just telling them the message about Jesus.

Power:

- Now, for those of you who are really scared of this idea.
- Part of the good news itself is that as followers of Jesus we have access to a power from beyond us.
- Power is a word many of us are uncomfortable with.
- But it's used all through the New Testament as a synonym for the Holy Spirit.
- The late Gordon Fee, the Pentecostal scholar and one of the foremost theologians on the Holy Spirit in the world, defines the Holy Spirit as "God's empowering presence."
- And we need God's empowering presence to share the gospel.
- The Apostle Paul said to the Corinthians:
 - "I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power." (1 Corinthians 2v3-5)
- If *Paul* needed the Spirit's power, how much more so do we?!
- Especially if we aim to follow the template of Jesus and Paul and the early Christians, of the *proclamation* of the gospel, followed by the *demonstration* of the gospel.
- Graham Tomlin — the Anglican bishop and theologian from St. Militus in London, has a three part framework I find helpful: We announce the kingdom of Jesus through words, works, and wonders.
- The first two, we kind of get. But the third one is really outside the box for Western Christians.
- But it's explicit in the New Testament.
- Matthew 4 says, "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, *and* healing every disease and sickness among the people." (Matthew 4v23)
- Then, in Matthew's biography, that's what you read about for the next five chapters — Jesus proclaiming *and* healing ...

- Then in chapter 9, Matthew uses a literary device called an “*inclusio*” to bookend this block of story; he repeats the same phrase: “Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness.” (Matthew 9v35)
- But you’re thinking, Yeah, but that was Jesus ...
- But then in the next chapter Jesus says this to his *disciples*: “As you go, proclaim this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give.” (Matthew 10v7-8)
- Meaning: Go and do what I have been doing!
- And this is exactly what we read all through the New Testament.
- Jesus’ followers are empowered by the *Spirit* of Jesus to demonstrate the arrival of the kingdom of God, through what the New Testament writers call “signs and wonders.”
- There are two primary examples of signs and wonders: healing and deliverance
- But there are many more examples in the New Testament:
 - Prophecy
 - Words of wisdom and knowledge
 - Speaking in tongues
 - Raising the dead
 - And even miracles.
- We err when we regulate these “signs and wonders” to Jesus only, or the early church only; when we have two thousand years of stories of the ongoing arrival of the kingdom through *Jesus* followers, up to the present day.
- While we may not have the courage to attempt raising the dead, surely we can at least pray for the sick to be healed.
- But none of this is stuff we can just go “do” in human strength.
- This should teach us to live in humble dependence on God, every day.
- Rising to pray, God, I need your power.

Follow the promptings:

- And it brings us full circle to the need for us as disciples of Jesus to learn to discern the divine promptings of the Holy Spirit in our heart and life, and to follow his leading at a moment's notice.
- The longer I follow Jesus, the more I believe this is *key*: that, very pragmatically, it's about really learning to quiet my mind and heart, and notice the soft, subtle intimations of the Holy Spirit in my mind and heart, and then to just *take the next step*.
- To follow the breadcrumbs.
- It's about training myself to live with open eyes: God, what are you doing? How do I join in?

Ending:

- To end: there's a church I'm friends with in Vancouver, BC, that just told me a great story.
- A guy in the city — *not* a Christian — but for some reason, his algorithm started feeding him all sorts of stuff on Jesus, and it piqued his curiosity.
- One day, he lost his wallet. And he prayed for Jesus to return it.
- *That same day*, a girl from the church found his wallet on the street, and dropped it off at his house.
- As she was leaving, she felt God quietly speak to her heart: "Go back and say you brought it in Jesus' name."
- She did not want to. It felt weird. But the impression just kept getting stronger.
- She goes back, tells him. He's wrecked. Starts to cry.
- He is now following Jesus and a part of the church.
- All she did was listen, and look, and ask, and risk.
- God did the rest.
- May you and I have eyes to see where God is at work this coming week, and join in.