

Jesus' Elevator Speech  
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We live in a culture with a short attention span. Over the last ten years our average attention span has dropped from twelve minutes to only five minutes.[1] Are you still with me? In fact, one of the strangest comments I heard at my former church was from a woman who told me that she always writes out her grocery list during the sermon, but she wouldn't do it when I was up to preach. Just because you hear me every Sunday, don't go getting ideas now. But this comment shows that we live in a multi-tasking, short attention span culture. Instead of reading a news story, we want the headlines. We update our social media sites with a quick sentence or two of what's happening in our lives. We listen for sound bites instead of long speeches. We want to get to the heart of the matter and do so quickly.

Many Mainline Protestant denominations have adapted to our culture's communication style. In describing themselves, the United Methodist Church is, "Open hearts. Open minds. Open doors." The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America says, "God's work. Our hands." The Presbyterian Church USA says what they believe in one sentence, "Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel, whom alone we worship and serve." [2]

We hopefully know our United Church of Christ's major identifying statement by now, "Never place a period where God has placed a comma. God is still speaking." But we also have a denominational phrase I say almost every week when I welcome you to church, "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here." And then there's a newer line from the UCC National Office, "Our faith is 2,000 years old. Our thinking is not." [3] As is typical of our United Church of Christ, we like options and diversity even when we say who we are and what we're about. Only one identifying statement? Please.

We may look at the Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, and our United Church of Christ and think that we are bending too much to the whims of our culture by trying to summarize who we are and what we believe in a sentence or two. But that criticism would be misguided. Because 2,000 years ago, well before Facebook and Twitter and Google, Jesus did this too. Jesus summarized what he was about by saying memorable lines or quoting scripture in new ways.

Today we see Jesus go into the temple in his hometown of Nazareth, turn to the Prophet Isaiah and read, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." [4] He sits down and tells the gathered crowd, so this is about me and I'm here to begin this work. In many ways, this is Jesus' elevator speech, he sums up who he is and what he's about in a couple of sentences from the prophet Isaiah.

Jesus announces that God's Spirit is with him, that he's been chosen to preach good news to the poor, announce pardon to prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to set the burdened and battered free, and to announce to everyone, 'This is God's year to act!' [5] Jesus takes his place among the prophets, claiming his rightful place at God's side. This won't be an easy place to be, we'll get to that when we hear part two of this passage next week.

In the meantime, UCC Minister Robin Meyers reminds us, "Prophets do not tell us what we want to hear, but what we need to hear. When they walk among us, unkempt and fiery-eyed, they are pitied by their peers. They are despised and mocked for calling so rudely for the end

to the unjust status quo. Good and decent people avoid them on the streets. Parents tell their children to look away. They are the last people we invite to a dinner party." [6]

The prophetic nature of the Christian message often gets lost because as Meyers rightly states, prophets make us uncomfortable. Sometimes we seem to be the church of have good manners and don't rock the boat and disturb anybody. Jesus' prophetic nature sometimes gets glossed over. Today's passage isn't just about Jesus' ministry; it's about the legacy he left behind for us to continue. As his followers, we are supposed to bring good news to the poor, release the captives, help the blind to see again, free the oppressed, and proclaim that God's time is now. If we don't do this work, who will?

Presbyterian minister Robert Brearley says it like this, "How can we know that we have the power of the Spirit? We know because the Holy Spirit gives us something to do for God, and a time to do it. There is a sense of urgency in Jesus' mission . . . 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' The time of God's Holy Spirit is today, right now. It is the Holy Spirit speaking when you hear God whisper to you: 'Child of God, live this day as if it were your first day, as if it were your last day, as if it were your only day.'" [7]

We may not want to live our lives this way. We may want to sit back and hope and pray for change, but we have to sometimes get our hands dirty to do the work of justice. Whenever I feel complacency in the Church, I am drawn time and again to Annie Dillard's words I first read in college. In thinking about the Christian Church Dillard wrote, "Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? . . . We should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews." [8] Because if we fully live into Jesus' message, if we live into these teachings he laid out today, if we have faith in the things he said and did—we need crash helmets, life preservers, and ushers to lash us to our pews because it's going to be a bumpy ride.

I'll give you an example. UCC Minister Martin Copenhaver tells a great story about the radical nature of inclusivity for the lost and the least we should have in the Church. When we say in the UCC that no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here—do we really mean it? Everyone is welcome? No matter who you are? No matter where you are? Really?

Copenhaver recounts that he once served a church that opened their doors to homeless men who needed a place to sleep. One stranger who wandered in was a man with Tourette's Syndrome named Bernie. Bernie was well-educated and could play Beethoven sonatas on the piano. But he couldn't hold a job because of his outbursts and his family couldn't take it anymore and kicked him out. Bernie would yell obscenities or bark like a dog due to his Tourette's, and the sound was jarring. And then one Sunday, Bernie decided to join the choir. Copenhaver tells us, "He had a beautiful voice when he wasn't barking. (Perhaps that experience explains why I am not disturbed as some people are by crying babies during worship. Once you've had someone bark periodically during your sermon, everything else seems to pale by comparison.)" [9]

At first the congregation discussed what to do about Bernie, and then opted to do nothing. The congregation decided to just be welcoming and allow this homeless man with Tourette's kicked out by his own family, unable to hold a job to sing in the choir whenever he felt like it, barking in the middle of the service, yelling obscenities, or other behaviors notwithstanding. In time, the congregation got used to Bernie's outbursts in worship. What ended up being rather comical was when visitors came to worship at this church.

Copenhaver says that visitors would look around the sanctuary to identify who was barking and couldn't help but notice that members of this church didn't even react to the noise

anymore. He says, "When visitors noticed the lack of response from the church members they would get uneasy—almost panicky—looks on their face that said, 'What kind of strange place is this that I've wandered into?' I have since concluded that this question is one of the highest compliments a church can receive." [10]

When we abide by Jesus' elevator speech, the first public sermon he gives that lays out who he is and what he's about, we become those strange churches. Those churches that need life preservers and lashed to the pews because we really do radical, crazy things like welcoming everyone, and I mean everyone. We do crazy things like ministering to the lost and the least, helping people who have been blinded by apathy or anger or hatred see the world with new eyes. Reaching out a hand to captives and prisoners, to those who are oppressed and broken down. For our faith may be 2,000 years old, but our thinking is not. God is Still Speaking. Amen.

[1] Neil Vidyarthi, "Attention Spans Have Dropped from 12 Minutes to 5 Minutes—How Social Media is Ruining Our Minds," December 14, 2011, [http://socialtimes.com/attention-spans-have-dropped-from-12-minutes-to-5-seconds-how-social-media-is-ruining-our-minds-infographic\\_b86479](http://socialtimes.com/attention-spans-have-dropped-from-12-minutes-to-5-seconds-how-social-media-is-ruining-our-minds-infographic_b86479)

[2] [www.umc.org](http://www.umc.org); [www.elca.org](http://www.elca.org); [www.pcusa.org](http://www.pcusa.org)

[3] [www.ucc.org](http://www.ucc.org)

[4] Luke 4:18-19, NRSV

[5] Luke 4:18-19, The Message.

[6] Robin Meyers, *The Underground Church: Reclaiming the Subversive Way of Jesus*, 13.

[7] Robert M. Brearley, *Pastoral Perspective of Luke 4:14-21, Feasting on the Word, Year C*, Volume 1, 286.

[8] Annie Dillard, as quoted by Gary W. Light, *Isaiah Interpretation Bible Studies*, 25.

[9] Lillian Daniel and Martin B. Copenhagen, *This Odd and Wondrous Calling: The Public and Private Lives of Two Ministers*, 98.

[10] *Ibid.*