Last Sunday at Annual Conference in Cincinnati
The preacher Leonard Sweet chided Congregations and denominations
For the time and energy spent In producing Vision and Mission Statements When Jesus already gave us one.

Matthew 29:19
Go and make disciples of all nations . . . .

It’s ironic that his comment came on the heels Of the delegate body’s decision on Saturday
To set aside all business for AC 2019 To develop a new vision for the church.

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I tend to agree with Sweet.

The church has spent a lot of time navel gazing Trying to find themselves

Rather than moving forward With the clear understanding Christ’s mandate for the church Is to share God’s love in word and deed Individually and as a church.

The church has a mission!

I quote from James Davison Hunter Professor of sociology at UVA.

He wrote this great but difficult book entitled To Change the World.
Hunter is a follower of Jesus.

He writes:

*First, for the Christian, evangelism is central to the identity and purpose in the world. To share the Gospel is to share the gift of life; the making of disciples is foundational to the Christian faith.*

I know in some circles
   The word evangelism has negative connotations.

I get that!

We are not to discuss religion much less promote it!

It’s okay to express our faith with acts of kindness
   Everybody appreciates that!

But if we bring up why we feel called to do such things
   That our Christian faith prompts us to love neighbor
      We’re accused of proselytizing!

Current social norms consider evangelism inappropriate
   Presumptuous, and arrogant . . .
      We are to live and let live.

However, the NT’s mandate is very clear . . .
   We are to share our faith in word and deed.

The argument is not whether you should or shouldn’t.

But how might we be most effective
   In sharing the love of God.
In an article from Christianity Today entitled

*A Lesson in Listening:*

*Why the best witnesses use their ears first*

*And their mouths later*

Christine Herman writes that when Tim Keller, Pastor of the Redeemer Church in NYC, announced his retirement, he shared thoughts on how to better connect with skeptics:

*We could do a far better job of patiently listening. And we should not talk until we can represent the skeptic’s viewpoint with empathy so that a skeptic friend says, ‘Yes, that is my hang up; I couldn’t have put it better myself.’ Only then should we try to . . . recommend the Christian faith to them.*

Has it ever occurred to us

That the most effective way to share God’s love

Is by listening?

It seems counter-productive.

A good friend and fellow minister in Nigeria, Toma Ragi Rnjia, spoke of his relationships to Muslims.

He states that before ever engaging

In conversations relating to faith

He gains the person’s trust . . .

If not, the conversation quickly becomes volatile.
And frankly I don’t know of anyone
Who has argued someone into the kingdom of God.

~~

With religious discussions
Like their political counterparts

It’s nigh impossible to have a civil conversation any longer.

We have learned not to bring up hot-button topics
Such as politics, religion, or sex.

From Face Book to family reunions
Our disagreements regularly turn into shouting matches
Where no one is listening and everyone is talking.

When it comes to sharing the love of God
There is a better way.
If we have any hope in bridging divisions
Between family members, churches, and communities

If we have any hope in fulfilling the mandate
To be witnesses for Jesus to all nations

Then the first thing we must learn . . .
Is how to have better conversations.

~~

Before entering into a discussion surrounding faith
It is important to know the basics of good conversation.

Because there is nothing worse
Than to hear someone with evangelistic zeal

Coming off as a Mr-know-it-all
With all the answers to life’s complex problems
Who can’t wait to hit you over the head with Jesus Christ!

It is rude and disrespectful.

The key to sharing the love of God
Is in building trusting relationships.

Remember the primary purpose of friendships
Is not to convert someone to your way of thinking
But to make a friend.

If there’s a transformation to be had
Let God do it . . .
God is quite capable of that!
Your job is to make and be a friend.

Trusting friendships don’t have hidden agendas.

There are some “do’s” and “don’ts” in relationship building.

The first “do” in friendship building is be a good listener.

James writes
Be quick to listen
   Slow to speak
   Slow to get angry.

James’ message is relevant for today.

A good listener is hard to find.

It seems conversations amount to taking turns talking.

Good listening is not easy.
It takes energy, discipline, and intentionality.

Let’s face it, it’s a whole lot easier to express your opinion
Pay no attention to what the other person is saying
And be done with it.

But by listening
You offer a trusting environment for conversation.

The second “do” in the art of friendship building
Is to ask a question that provokes a weightier answer.

A good question invites deeper dialog.

Tailor the discussion to fit the context.

Follow in the direction the person is heading.

There may be a reason the conversation is heading that way.

In other words, don’t try and control the conversation.

It will easily be discerned you have an agenda.

If you are serious and really want to share the love of God
Your basic concern is the well-being
Of the person you are engaged with.

Questions obviously help you to get to know the other.

Another “do” in conversation is to let silence be silence.
A thought-filled silence is not a bad thing.

In good conversation
   You don’t have to fill the silence!

If in silence you sense a time to speak . . . speak.

But, the 4th “do” in conversation is
   Make sure you think before you speak.
Because if, as you are speaking
   The listener’s eye begin to glaze over

No matter how important
   You think what you are saying is . . .
      You’re just sucking up the air in the room.

If you think before you speak
   It might just give God a chance
      To place on your lips
         Something worthy of hearing.

~~
Okay. Now about some “don’ts” in conversation.

Don’t be a conversational narcissist.

A conversational narcissist is someone
   Who only talks about themselves.

If you dominate the conversation . . . stop!

Few people want to hear it!

If the person you are engaged in conversation with
   Is the conversational narcissist
      May God have mercy . . . but be patient.
Most conversational narcissists are hurting people.

In time, with patience
The brokenness can surface and healing may occur.

The 2nd “don’t” is not to interrupt someone.

A 1954 magazine article from *Esquire Etiquette*
Describes two forms of interruption:

“The obvious one, interrupting the speaker in mid-sentence, is easy to avoid: just wait until the other has stopped talking before you start. (And don’t ever say, “Have you finished?” You might as well say right out that he’s a windy numskull and you thought he’d never run down.)

The other kind of interruption, equally culpable, is often prefaced by “That reminds me...” or “By the way.” Such phrases usually signal a digression or irrelevancy. When you interrupt another’s train of thought, or send a discussion off into a tangent, you indicate that you are either stupid or rude, either unable or unwilling to stick with the speaker’s point.

The 3rd “don’t” in good conversation
Is not to dig too deeply too soon.

We must respect the privacy of others.

If the one you’re talking to
Shies away from a sensitive subject . . .

Leave it alone . . .
Don’t push it!
And finally, the last “don’t” in good conversation
       And I shouldn’t have to say this . . .
Put away the electronics!

There is nothing worse than being in a conversation
       Only for you to answer a phone call.

It shows insensitivity and states clearly
       That whoever is on the other line
           Is far more important than this conversation.

To effectively share the love of God
       We are to establish relationships with people
           Lasting and meaningful friendships.

And hear me . . . this is not JUST the attempt
       To convert someone to the Christian faith . . .

In a mutual friendship . . .
       There will be mutual value.

You will gain as much as you give
       In such friendships.

God will enrich both of your lives.

We must remember
       If God is present
           Then God can and will
               Lead and guide a sincere conversation.

Christians promoting unity among fellow Christians
       Christians seeking to be an influence in the world
           Christians helping to lead people to Christ
Need to do a lot less talking and a lot more listening.

The good news of Jesus Christ will only touch someone when it meets the person in their greatest need. That doesn’t happen when you’re doing all the talking. It takes a relationship.

James says be a good listener.

Being a good listener conveys love and ultimately that is the work of the evangelist . . . conveying love.

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We, Brethren, have done well in proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ in deed. We’re awkward when it comes to proclaiming it in word. Jesus seeks us to engage in both.

It’s simple really. Be a friend and offer a listening ear. God is quite capable of doing the rest.