

A Tradition and Future of Witnessing

Matt. 25:31-40, Deuteronomy 10:17-19, Hebrews 13:1-3

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Witnessing is another one of those words used in Christian circles that has fallen on hard times because of the narrow way in which some believe it's to be done – the purpose for which it is done. Some have hurt people by the way in which they've gone about witnessing – they've abused or misused the concept by the way they've done it.

And yet, the 2008 General Conference of The United Methodist Church added it to our membership vows. When we join The United Methodist Church we agree “to support the ministries of the church with our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness.”¹ Why? What is the purpose for doing so? How should we do it?

First, we need to define what it is we understand witnessing to be. We begin as we always should with references in scripture. The word is used numerous places. Some of the most often referenced include: Acts 1:8 – “...and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth;” Luke 24:46-48 – “And he said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things;’” Acts 10:39-41 – “We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead;” which was part of Peter's speech during which Christianity began to be understood as something for everyone, not just for the Jews.

According to the dictionary a witness is a person who gives evidence, has first-hand knowledge of, serves as evidence of.²

At first, the aforementioned scripture passages and dictionary reference would seem to allow us to escape the necessity of witnessing in our day. After all, we really did not physically, with our own eyes, actually observe the work of Jesus in the first century – so what are we to tell?

At the every four year General Conference of The United Methodist Church The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church is approved. It's a compilation of current and official social policies and thinking of the denomination. The Book of Resolutions serves primarily as a reference tool for us.³ Thousands of topics are covered in this book – resolutions like “Rape in Times of Conflict and War,” “Ethics of Embryonic Stem Cell Research,” “Global Migration and the Quest for Justice,” “Campaign Finance Reform in the United States,” and one on “Gambling,” which, if you haven't heard lately, we continue to encourage abstinence from thus guiding our continued objecting of its further legalization of in our state.

In a section titled “Called to Be Neighbors and Witnesses: Guidelines for Interreligious Relationships” there is this sentence: “We witness to our Lord through words which tell of his grace, through deeds of service and social change that demonstrate his love, and through our life together in the Christian community, exhibiting God's power to heal, reconcile, and unite.”⁴ We witness by our words, deeds, positions, and the way we live together. We witness when we bridge boundaries - whether they be geographic, sociological, racial or cultural

ones – for the purpose of encouraging healing and reconciliation. We witness when we pass on to others what Jesus Christ has done in our lives – what difference his work in us, to us, with us, makes in how we live our lives and in what we say.

The questions we need to ask ourselves in order to reclaim our voice for witnessing, in order to “walk the walk” as well as “talk the talk” might be ones like: “What difference has your saying yes to being a follower of Jesus Christ meant to the way you live your life?” “What personal experiences were impacted by your relationship to Jesus, God, the Holy Spirit?” “What role did Jesus, God, the Holy Spirit have in how you dealt with some of the challenges of life?” We are witnesses, you see, when we share how our own experiences reflect, record anew, the changes, affirmations in our lives as a result of repenting, being forgiven, knowing new life in our being. It is when we give evidence with our own lives, have first-hand knowledge of what happens as a result of an encounter with God that we witness. “What are the things you received when you became aware that God was in you in a new or different way?”⁶

Those aforementioned questions caused me to do some thinking this past week about some of those experiences in my life and some of the witnesses that were involved in my journey of faith. I couldn’t help but first think of Mrs. Echelbarger – an elderly member of my hometown church who was also a member of the WCTU – that’s the Women’s Christian Temperance Union. While I no longer am as adamant about some of her ideas about alcohol consumption, that is, no longer critical of others consuming alcohol but still unable to do so myself except for a sip once in awhile, her witness to me that I have never been able to forget and hope I never do, was/is that being a Christian involves more than saying something. Her witness was that Christians care about social issues. Her witness was that Christians care about others – care enough for her, an over-eighty-year-plus woman, to attend youth group meetings and share her life with us.

And then there was my mom – who was a witness of the unconditional love and grace of God. In my pre-teen days for sure, she always took the side of the underdog – the disadvantaged, those without – even if it meant her going without – her going out of her way to help – her loading up her four elementary and preschool age children and taking them with her to the house down the street that served as a nursing home. Mom said with her life that Christians cared about others – were not critical of the circumstances of others.

And then there was dad – not always a practicing believer – but once he became one, wow. When Christ takes hold of your life, it’s all of your life – what you have, becomes God’s and is available for God’s work. Whether it was supplying eggs for a community dinner because that’s what he had to offer or organizing the volunteers to run the fair tent or going to an Administrative Board meeting to argue for the use of the fellowship hall for a teen center after Friday or Saturday night ballgames, dad witnessed with his time, resources, and voice. After he was disabled and retired from the egg business he was instrumental in organizing a county thrift store as a further witness that knowing that Christ was in you meant you had to share what you had with those who did not have.

And then there was the Defiance District Senior High Institute between my sophomore and junior years when I had one of many “aha” moments – when I became aware in a unique way that I was loved by God – that I was forgiven by God – that I didn’t have to feel guilty all the time about the teenage thoughts that were fighting for playing time in me. While some of what took place that week I have since rejected as manipulation of the teenage experience, there’s no question that the good news took on new meaning.

Some of the negatives of the theology that grew out of that experience it took many more “aha” experiences in future years to adjust. I became much less critical and more receptive to persons with other religious viewpoints as a result of spending a lot of quality time with a devout woman of the Catholic persuasion who later became my wife. Besides being sincere about what she believed and practiced, she didn’t have the same prejudices about other denominations and faiths like had been my experience with some folks I spent much time with during the latter years of high school. Her witness to me was that it was more important to be accepting of others than to be critical if Jesus was in one’s heart.

And then there was the afternoon with Martin Luther King, Jr. when doing came alongside beliefs in an even more vital way. His witness with both his life and his death was that there are some things important enough to God to give your life for. He awakened in me a consciousness about race and the poor that has never left me.

And then there was having the second fastest time in the state of Ohio my senior year and tearing a hamstring and never making it to the state meet in track; the two miscarriages and my brother Gary’s mental illness, fundamentalism, and suicide – close-mindedness, judgementalism, beliefs are more important than people, good always happens to those who believe in God, God protects you if you believe in God, things always go your way if you live right and believe in God – beliefs that all went out the window – got reformulated – influenced a new perspective on who I was as a minister and how I was going to minister.

Through the aid of people who witnessed how their lives had been transformed, influenced by their becoming aware of Jesus residing in them – God graciously acting in their lives so that they became aware of a forgiving God, an accepting God; relationships were healed in me, spiritual renewal became a way of life rather than a goal for me, I gained peace in my soul, I gained strength to accept disappointments as part of life and not the end of my life.

In the book of Acts a disciple by the name of Tabitha is noted. It’s the only reference in the New Testament of a woman disciple. Rodney Smothe observes in his “A Living Witness” sermon: “We must be careful not to miss the significance of this description because it represents a radical departure from the roles and status of women in the New Testament community. Second, Tabitha’s identification as a ‘disciple,’ from a cultural perspective is radical. Not only does it illustrate the use of ordinary circumstances to bring about miraculous results, but it illustrates God’s willingness to use persons regardless of their gender for service.”⁶

Tabitha was an important cog in the ministry of her community. She ran a soup kitchen, clothing and food pantry, and a homeless shelter. Tabitha’s ministry aided the poor widows in Lydda. These were the down and out in that day – they were the lost and the least. There would have been a community crisis if she had not organized the ministries she did. “Tabitha represented hope in the midst of despair, faith in the midst of failure, victory in the midst of defeat.” Tabitha was a living witness that God can bring healing into the lives of people who are broken.⁷

In our “A Tradition of Caring and A Future of Possibilities” stewardship campaign we have coupled the concept of Radical Hospitality with the witness aspect of our membership vow. We have done so because one of the marks of vibrant, growing, faithful, fruitful congregations is a willingness to build bridges across the boundaries our world allows or encourages to exist. The world is in need of living witnesses willing to move beyond the doors of our church to where people are begging for level-headed Christians who care unapologetically. Again, quoting from Rodney Smothe’s sermon: “Living sermons speak volumes of love. We live in a society where barriers of race, culture, gender, sexual preference, and economic status continue to separate people. Racism,

hate crimes, discrimination, and mean-spiritedness are increasing even among those of us who profess faith in Christ. Do we really have to put others down to lift ourselves up?”⁸

Today we remember some of those who have been living witnesses through this congregation or others. Today we celebrate their witness among us – the tradition of witnessing they shared with their words and deeds. Today we dream of the future possibilities that are ours if we continue to witness to one another and those beyond our doors of the love, acceptance, grace, forgiveness that changes lives and moves us to serve.

1. The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2008), p. .
2. Webster’s Dictionary & Thesaurus (New Lanark, Scotland: Geddes & Grosset Ltd., 1995), p. 648.
3. The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2008), p. 25.
4. Ibid., p. 282.
5. Douglas J. Deuel, “Witnesses For the Lord,” Returning to God (Lima: CSS Publishing, 1997), 0-7880-1029-8.
6. Rodney Thomas Smothe, “A Living Witness,” Turning Obstacles Into O (Lima: CSS Publishing Company, 1994), 0-7880-0031-4.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.