

What's Your Witness?

Acts 5:27-32

April 11, 2010

A Sunday School teacher was carefully explaining the story of the prophet Elijah and the false prophets of Baal. She explained how Elijah built an altar, put wood on it, cut a steer into pieces and laid it on the altar. Then she explained how Elijah commanded the people four times to fill four barrels of water and pour them over the altar. Then the teacher asked the class, "Can anyone tell me why the Lord would have Elijah have the people pour water over the steer on the altar?"

A little girl in the back of the room started waving her hand and shouted out, "I know! I know! To make the gravy!"

Another Sunday School teacher was telling her class the story of the Good Samaritan. In order for the students to understand the drama, she was fairly vivid in her description of the robbery and the beating the traveler endured. Finally she asked the class, "If you saw a person lying on the roadside, all wounded and bleeding, what would you do?"

A thoughtful little girl broke the silence with, "I think I'd throw up."

What kind of man was Boaz before he married Ruth? Ruthless.

What do they call pastors in Germany? German Shepherds.

What US state is mentioned in the Bible? Arkansas. "Noah looked out of the ark and saw."

What kind of motor vehicles are mentioned in the Bible? Jehovah drove Adam and Eve out of the Garden in a Fury. David's Triumph as heard throughout the land. Honda – because the apostles were all in one Accord.

Holy Humor Sunday – a day when the emphasis is on laughter a whole lot more than normal. The intent is to highlight that Easter is a reminder that God played a joke on evil - that good is more powerful than evil – that disappointment, rejection, sin, depression, addiction, racism, sexism, physical ailments, hatred can be overcome – that new life can be born out of death – that resurrection can be experienced in our lives in this day. One of our roles as Christians is to witness – to share – with one another and with others how this has happened in our lives.

The book of Acts of the Apostles provides us glimpses of some of the great moments and personalities of the early church. The portion read for us this morning is an accounting of what happened after Peter and a group of the apostles had been imprisoned for preaching about the risen Christ and had miraculously escaped in the middle of the night. The angel of the Lord had opened the doors of the prison, led them out and said to them: "Go, stand in the Temple and tell the people all the words of this life."

And so they did. They went into the Temple very early the next morning and began to teach. When the Sanhedrin arrived they learned of the non-violent jailbreak. They were puzzled and furious. They again arrested the apostles but did so carefully so as to avoid angering those listening to them because they were afraid those listening would turn on them and stone them.

It's really no surprise that the apostles were arrested a second time – they had been ordered not to teach in the name of Jesus and they had publicly disregarded the injunction. It's important to remember here that as far as the Sanhedrin was concerned there were two things that made what the apostles did wrong. They were both

heretics and potential disturbers of the peace. Palestine was a volatile country – uprisings could burst forth at the slightest provocation. The last thing the priests and Sadducees wanted was for there to be an uprising thus causing Rome to intervene and they lose their place and prestige.

This narrative reminds us how courageous the leaders of the early church were. They knew what was going to happen to them if they continued to share stories about Jesus and yet they disregarded their personal safety.

They were also people of principle. The question they asked themselves was not if the action was safe, but is this what God wants us to do?

But, the characteristic I want us to focus on this morning is that they had a clear understanding of what they were to do – witness – share from their experiences what they believed about Jesus. It's one of our roles as followers as well. That's why it was added to our United Methodist membership vows at the last General Conference. We promise when we become a member of the United Methodist Church to support the ministries of the church with our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness.

I will confess that I believe that much that has been done in the name of witnessing doesn't make it very appealing to many. I choose this morning to ignore offensive witnessing – that form of sharing about Christ's teachings and what Christ has done that causes people to want nothing to do with him or his followers. Witnessing does not have to be offensive.

Pat Riddle is a Lutheran pastor in North Carolina. When he and his wife were on their honeymoon in Savannah, Georgia, they decided they wanted to eat some Chinese food for supper. They noticed a small Chinese restaurant across the way from their motel room. It didn't particularly look like a five-star – it seemed a little tattered around the edges – but they decided to give it a try anyway.

Their meal was wonderful. As they were paying their check, the lady behind the cash register noticed that they were newlyweds. She asked them if she could give them a present. When they nodded, she reached under the counter, pulled out a little porcelain Chinese house, handed it to them and said, "Always keep Christ in your home and marriage. This house will remind you of keeping him in your lives. This is my gift to you."

Her witness was warm and kind. It was gentle and sincere. It was beautiful and caring.¹

A preacher accepted a call to a church in Houston, Texas. Several weeks after he arrived in Houston, he had to take the bus from his home to the downtown area of the city. After he sat down, he realized that the bus driver accidentally gave him a quarter too much in change. The thoughts that ran through his head included: "I'd better give the quarter back. It would be wrong to keep it." "Oh, forget it, it's only a quarter. Who would worry about this little amount? The bus company charges too much anyway. They will never miss it. It will cause more delay for others getting off to return it than to just keep it."

When he came to his stop, he paused at the door and handed the quarter to the driver and said, "Here, you gave me too much change."

The driver, with a smile on his face, replied, "Aren't you the new preacher in town?"

The preacher replied, "Yes."

“Well, I’ve been thinking a lot lately about going somewhere to worship. I just wanted to see what you would do if I gave you too much change. I’ll see you at church on Sunday.”

When the preacher stepped off the bus, he literally grabbed the nearest light pole as he prayed, “Oh God, I almost sold your Son for a quarter.”²

We preach – we witness – most often with how we live our lives. Sometimes some of us have to use our mouths to share what being a follower of Christ means to us to be sure. But the majority of us will the majority of our time witness with how we live.

A family in the neighborhood around this church lost their twelve-year-old son a few weeks ago. He had fought the good fight for several years with leukemia. The family posted on the Caring Bridge website every few days what was going on with their son and what they were thinking. I have to admit to you that hearing them – reading them express their faith touched many of us with whom they shared their journey. I want to read to you a portion of a post the mother shared the day before Easter.

“Today marks 4 weeks since he died. I do not intend to be one of those people who keeps continual count, but it does seem poignant since it is Holy Saturday. While he was in no way Christ, he seems to have brought many people closer to him.

“We have made our annual trek to Kiawah Island, SC. (Two of our children) were born in SC so this state will always hold a special place in our heart. Last night our dog and I walked down to the dock over the Inlet. This dock is a floating dock that can rise and fall with the tide waters. It was a perfect night.....the waters were as smooth as glass and the sky was crystal clear. I felt as if I could touch any star I chose. I kept thinking of the Eskimo legend that says ‘maybe stars are not stars at all, but instead holes to Heaven where our loved ones can look down upon us.’ I turned my face up to those ‘holes’ and had my own private conversation with (my son). I am sure he could see my tears in the moonlight, but such is life. He was no stranger to my tears.

“This morning (our dog) and I went back down to the dock to watch the sunrise. It may sound silly but when I opened the front door I was assaulted by the smell of the ocean and the ‘fish’ smell of the marsh. It wrapped itself around me like a blanket. I have always loved the ocean and the constant reminders of the "ebb and flow" of life that the tide represents. As I looked over the inlet and the marsh grasses I saw so many little details that remind me of the circle of life. The tide comes and goes. The tide gives and it takes away. The tide destroys and rebuilds. The tide is constant and predictable, yet it is both calm and rough. It is high and low. It mirrors so many of my own feelings right now.

“Watching the sun rise, that big ball of fire rising out of the tall marsh grasses, is a sight to behold. Watching the colors reflect off the smooth surface of the inlet waters....a truly beautiful sight. (My son) has started a new day for me. There may not be cardinals down here (that’s a reference to another whole posting), but I know there will be plenty of sunshine. I intend to let it's warmth help me heal.”³

I’m not sure I’ve ever been touched as profoundly by someone’s musings about life and God’s world as I have been by this young grieving mother. She witnesses of her belief in God as a source of comfort and healing when she writes. What a powerful witness this family has been as we’ve been privileged to read their faith musings in the midst of their time of grief.

So, what's our witness? How do we worship God with our living? How is it we awaken in others that curiosity about God? One of the ways is by the way we look at life. Sometimes we Christians take ourselves far too seriously. I have a feeling that many more people would be interested in trying out this journeying with Christ if we were a little happier more of the time. Now, I'm not talking about the overdone "everything's alright here" – a constantly smiling despite the very worst things that possibly could be going wrong, going wrong. I'm not talking about the kind of blindness to pain and suffering in the world that comes with giving God credit for everything that happens – even the bad and so we should be glad for the bad because it's from God.

No, what I'm talking about is living like the resurrection is true – that despite the bad that happens around us, believing that God hurts with us, comforts us, will help bring something new out of the old. I'm talking about laughing at ourselves – laughing with others – giving thanks for the people around us who offer us support – encourage us – walk beside us when we're not a whole lot of fun to be around.

I came across a list this week that one person suggests might be helpful for worshipping God with our lives when it gets down to the nitty-gritty of living. I'd like to close with it. She notes: "Love the unlovely." "Give God your firstfruits." "Pick up litter." "Be neighborly. Borrow some sugar." "Say 'please' and 'thank you.'" "Be stealth. Give in secret." "Show your muscle. Help the weak." "Cut the distractions. Turn off the tube." "Give up the gossip." "Forget about the dust bunnies. Open up your home." "Take care of yourself." "Drive the speed limit." "Lend a hand. And a shoulder." "Forgive. And forget."⁴

Now, before we close by singing "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee" there's an interesting list developed by some creative mind of well-known hymns that just seem to be more appropriate for specific groups of people. I think you'll catch on as the Maple Grove Players offer this humorous list.

1. King Duncan, "He Is Who He Says He Is," Collected Sermons: Dynamic Preaching, 2005, 0-000-0000-20.
2. "A Christian," from the internet.
3. Wendi Jenkins, Caring Bridge, on Seth Jenkins' Caring Bridge page, April, 3, 2010, <http://www.caringbridge.org/visit/sethjenkins>.
4. Laura MacCorkle, "14 Ways to Worship with Your Life."