

“You Will Be My Witnesses”

Luke 24:44-53, Acts 1:1-11

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What would you say is the church’s witness to the world today?

I was driving this week along interstate 70 going towards Dayton when I saw a billboard that read, “If you died today, where would you spend eternity?” and then another right near it that read, “God is real.” It reminded me of similar billboards along interstate 71 on the way to Cincinnati that display the ten commandments along with the phrase “Hell is real.”

The next day, I was near the OSU campus, and I was reminded of Brother Jed. When the weather was nice, you could find Brother Jed on the oval with a Bible in one hand and words of damnation spewing from his mouth. It seemed his mission was to tell every student at Ohio State how their immoral lives would lead them to eternal punishment by God. I could go on and on with examples of this kind of witness, and I’m sure you could add your own.

Our scripture texts this morning are Luke’s account of the transition from Jesus’ mission and ministry in the world to the church’s mission and ministry in the world. We heard the final few verses of the Gospel of Luke, and the first few verses of the book of Acts. Both books were written by Luke, so in a sense, they are one story, with this section serving as a hinge point where the story turns. Jesus is no longer the main character. The early church becomes the main character.

Just before Jesus ascends into heaven, he says to the disciples, “You have seen all that I have done, now you will be my witnesses to the world.” What he was telling them was that in their words and deeds they were to proclaim what they had seen and heard of God’s justice, power and love in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. And they were to take this mission, this witness, to an ever-widening audience – to Jerusalem (their local area), to all Judea (their nation), to Samaria (those people they really don’t like), and “to the end of the earth” (everyone).

I’m not sure you could convince me that when Jesus gave these instructions, what he really had in mind was a billboard saying “Hell is real” or having his believers going about proclaiming damnation to a bunch of college students. For sure, repentance is a key element of what Jesus proclaimed, but he didn’t do it in a way that used fear-based tactics, Jesus spoke in love, and spoke of love. He was encouraging the disciples to take what they had experienced and share it with the world. It’s that kind of witness that Jesus is calling us to share with the world.

So how well would you say we’re doing at this?

There is a cartoon in which two women are having coffee together. One is passionately sharing her witness, saying “He's changed my life. He communicates with me every day of the week. Anywhere I go, he's there. He lets me know how I should live and what I should think. He tells me the true meaning of life. I just love Dr. Phil!”

That little cartoon speaks volumes about our witness in the world. Almost every single one of us is excellent at witnessing, just not about our faith. Our witness tends to be more about books or movies or other things like that. Just think about it. When we read a book or see a movie that has a deep impact on us, we tell everyone we meet. How many of us have been told that we really need to see *Slumdog Millionaire* or read the *Twilight* books?

For most of us though, the whole idea of witnessing to our faith is uncomfortable because the majority of Christian witnessing we have experienced is negative and we don't want to be associated with it. Those billboards and preachers like Brother Jed actually make me a little sick to my stomach. I just can't believe that that's what people are experiencing of Christianity. We don't want to be a part of that witness. We're afraid what people will think of us. And so we tend to remain silent about our experience of Christ.

Some leaders in The United Methodist Church noticed this, and made a proposal at our denominational meeting last summer to add the phrase “and witness” to the membership vows we take, so that we will promise to support the ministry of the church through not only our prayers, our presence, our gifts and our service, but also our witness. The United Methodist General Board of Discipleship wrote that “Adding ‘and witness’ to the list may help our members, new and old, to recognize their responsibilities not only to ‘show up,’ but to ‘show forth’ God's saving love in all that we do.”<sup>1</sup>

And so it might be a good idea to think for a moment about the public witness of our denomination. You might recognize our denomination's motto saying that The United Methodist Church and its people have “Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors.” When that phrase was launched several years ago, there were many people who didn't like it. Some were mad because they didn't think our hearts or minds or doors were open enough. Others just didn't want to have open hearts or minds or doors to certain people or ideas.

Our denominational leadership is beginning to challenge us to Rethink Church, and is changing our public witness of church on a denominational level. A new national advertising campaign has begun that asks the question “What if church wasn't just a building, but thousands of doors? Each of them opening up to a different concept or experience of church – and a journey that could change our world. Would you come?” What if church was a verb instead of a noun? They kept the phrase, “Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors” but they changed it a bit. Instead of proclaiming that our church and its people have “Open Hearts, Open Minds, and Open Doors” they are proclaiming

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<sup>1</sup> “New Membership Vows and Ritual”  
[http://www.gbod.org/worship/default.asp?act=reader&item\\_id=46866&loc\\_id=9,824](http://www.gbod.org/worship/default.asp?act=reader&item_id=46866&loc_id=9,824)

that our church is a movement that “Opens Hearts, Opens Minds, Opens Doors.” I have been a part of the team that is rolling this concept out to our conference, and I’m so glad that I am, because I really like this concept, and the witness it bears to our faith as a denomination.

In his book, “The Kingdom of God is a Party,” Tony Campolo tells a story that illustrates how I believe the church must begin to live out our witness in this new millennium. Campolo was attending a Christian conference in Honolulu, Hawaii. Since there was a six-hour time differential between Honolulu and his hometown in Pennsylvania, on his first night there Campolo experienced some confusion in his sleep pattern. He woke up about 3 o’clock in the morning and couldn’t get back to sleep. So he got up, got dressed, and left the hotel where he was staying, searching for a place to get something to eat. Eventually he found a tiny coffee shop that was open. Here is his description of what happened there:

"The fat guy behind the counter came over and asked me what I wanted. I told him I wanted a cup of coffee and a donut. As I sat there munching my donut and sipping my coffee at 3:30 in the morning, the door suddenly opened wide, and to my discomfort, in marched 8 or 9 provocatively dressed and rather boisterous prostitutes. It was a small place and they sat on either side of me. Their talk was garrulous, loud, and crude. I felt completely out of place. I was just about to make my getaway when I heard the woman next to me say, ‘You know, tomorrow is my birthday. I’m going to be 39.’ Her friend responded in a rather nasty tone, ‘So what do you want from me? A birthday party? What do you want? You want me to get a cake, and sing happy birthday to you?’ ‘Come on,’ the woman sitting next to me said, ‘why do you have to be so mean? I’m just telling you that it’s my birthday. Why do you have to put me down? I don’t want anything from you. I mean, why should I have a birthday party? I’ve never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I have one now?’

Campolo says, "When I heard that, I made a decision. I sat and waited until the women left, and then I called over to the fat guy behind the counter and asked him, ‘Do they come in here every night?’ He answered, ‘Yeah.’ ‘The one who was sitting right next to me, does she come in every night?’ ‘Yeah,’ he said, ‘that’s Agnes. Yeah, she comes in every night. Why do you want to know?’ ‘Because,’ I replied, ‘I heard her say that tomorrow is her birthday. What do you say we do something special for her? What do you think about throwing a birthday party for her right here in the coffee shop?’ A cute kind of smile crept over that fat man’s chubby cheeks. ‘That’s a great idea,’ he said. ‘I like it. That’s great. Agnes is one of those people who is really nice and kind. I don’t think anybody has ever done anything nice and kind for her.’

‘Well, look,’ I told him, ‘if it’s okay with you, I’ll be back here tomorrow morning at 2:30. I’ll decorate the place. I’ll even get a birthday cake for her,’ ‘No way!’ he replied. ‘The birthday cake, that’s my thing. I’ll bake the birthday cake myself.’

"At two thirty the next morning," Campolo says, "I was back at that coffee shop. I picked up some crepe paper and other decorations at the store, and made a sign of big pieces of

cardboard that said 'Happy Birthday, Agnes!' I decorated that diner from one end to the other. I had it really looking great. The word must have gotten out on the street, because by 3:15 that morning it seemed that every prostitute in Honolulu was in that place. There was wall-to-wall prostitutes – and me. At 3:30 on the dot, the door of the diner swung open and in came Agnes and her friend. I had everybody ready... When they came in we all jumped up and screamed, 'Happy Birthday, Agnes!' Then we sang to her. And you know, I've never seen a person so flabbergasted, so stunned, so shaken. Her mouth fell open, her knees started to buckle, her friend had to offer her arm to steady her, and I noticed she had started to cry. When the birthday cake with all the candles was carried out, that's when she lost it. She started sobbing. Harry, the fat guy behind the counter, gruffly mumbled, 'Blow out the candles, Agnes, blow out the candles.' Then he handed her a knife and said, 'Cut the cake, Agnes, cut the cake.'

Agnes looked down at that cake, and without taking her eyes off it, she slowly and softly said, 'Look, Harry, is it okay with you if I, I mean, if I don't, what I want to ask, is it okay if I keep the cake for a little while? Is it okay if we don't eat it right away?' Harry shrugged and answered, 'Well, sure, Agnes, that's fine. You want to keep the cake, keep the cake. Take it home if you want to.' 'Oh, could I?' she asked. Looking at me, she said, 'I just live down the street a couple of doors. I want to take the cake home, okay? I'll be right back, honest.' She got off her stool, she picked up that cake, and she carried it out of the diner like it was the Holy Grail. She walked slowly toward the door, and we all just stood there, speechless. When the door closed behind her, there was stunned silence in the place.

Not knowing what else to do, I broke the silence by saying, 'What do you say we pray together?' Looking back on it now, it seems more than a little strange that a sociologist from eastern PA would be leading a prayer meeting with a bunch of prostitutes in a diner in Honolulu at 3:30 in the morning. But I prayed. I prayed for Agnes. I prayed for her salvation. I prayed that her life would be changed, and that God would be good to her. And when I finished, Harry leaned over, and with a trace of hostility in his voice, he said, 'Hey, you never told me you were a preacher! What kind of preacher are you anyway? What church do you belong to?'

In one of those moments when just the right words come, I answered him quietly, 'I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning.' Harry thought for a minute, and then almost sneered as he answered, 'No you don't! There is no church like that. In fact,' he concluded, 'if there was, I'd join it.'"

Maybe Harry was right. Maybe there is no church that is open enough to the leading of the Holy Spirit to be that kind of church. But if the church is to continue to provide a witness to the world about the unconditional love of God in this millennium and beyond, that's the kind of church we're going to have to become.<sup>2</sup>

Friends, the invitation to Christian Discipleship this morning is to bear witness to your faith; to bear witness to the love of God for the world. Let us not be afraid to share our

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<sup>2</sup> Johnny Dean, "The Kind of Church to Become" [esermons.com](http://esermons.com)

experience of God with those we know and those we meet. Let us bear witness to the abiding presence and love of God in our own lives. Let us stop the monologue of those who use fear-based tactics to try to scare people into faith. Let us be a movement of people who open hearts, open minds and open doors so that the whole world might know of God's love for each one of us, that God finds good in each one of us, that no matter what we do or what we have done, God stands with open arms, longing to be in deep relationship with each one of us. Let us to into the world proclaiming this witness.

Amen.