

You Will Be My Witnesses

Acts 1:6-8, Psalm 22 (Voices United, p. 746, Part Three, Sing Refrain)

I looked up the definition of a “witness” in several dictionaries. Every dictionary essentially came to the same conclusion:

- a witness is an individual who personally sees some event or thing
- a witness is a beholder or eyewitness
- a witness is a person who gives testimony.

In other words, a witness is someone who has personal knowledge of something and is able to give evidence of that experience through his or her deeds and words.

After Jesus ascended to be with the Father, as Acts 1 verses 2 and 9 state, being reliable witnesses for Jesus was very important to the Apostles. Because Judas -- one of the original twelve disciples – had taken his own life, Peter noted that the Scripture indicated they were to replace him. They wanted to choose someone who had been with them from the time Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist to the day of Jesus’ ascension. The new Apostle had to be a witness to Jesus’ teaching and miracles and to Jesus’ resurrection as the other Apostles were (Acts 1:15-26). The touchstone to being an Apostle was to have been in the same room with the Risen Jesus.

What his witnesses would say was also so important to Jesus that, after his resurrection, Jesus wanted to make sure his followers understood the real issues. I wonder what the Apostles thought Jesus meant when they had conversations with him about the kingdom of God. That seemed to be the prime topic of conversation for about 40 days – the time between Jesus’ resurrection from the dead and his ascension to be with his Father.

Did they continue to misunderstand what being God’s chosen people really meant? Did they continue to think they were destined for special privilege in the world? Their little stretch of country -- not more than 120 miles long by 40 miles wide – had some glory years of independence but not many. The Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks and now the Romans had clearly dominated them for hundreds of years. So if anything positive were to happen – for the Jewish people to gain their independence – it had to be up to God to establish the nation of Israel again. They all dreamed about that. The Apostles hoped the time had come. And realizing that Jesus was the Messiah, they still hoped he would lead them to independence and glory again.

But how did Jesus regard the kingdom of God? Think about the prayer – the Lord’s Prayer -- Jesus taught his followers. He put two petitions side by side: “Thy kingdom come; thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven.” It is characteristic of Hebrew style to say things in parallel forms, the second of which repeats or augments the first. That is what these two petitions do in the Lord’s Prayer. The second actually defines the first. So what Jesus meant by God’s kingdom coming was when all humanity would do God’s will on Earth as perfectly as God’s will is done in heaven. And this kingdom of God would be a kingdom founded on love, not achieved by brute force.

The Apostles’ question to Jesus was “Is now the time when you are going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” That wasn’t the right question for Jesus. He didn’t go there with them. Instead, he responded this way in verse 7:

- The times and the seasons are in my Father’s hands and it is not for you to know when these will be. Besides, my Father has something else he wants you – my followers -- to do next.

In verse 8, Jesus said:

- For your mission, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.

- And your mission is, you will be **my** witnesses.
- Jesus' final instructions were: You will be my witnesses right here in Jerusalem first, then throughout Judea, then in Samaria – the area you used to avoid because you didn't like the Samaritans – and, finally, you'll be my witnesses to the ends of the Earth. There is no place on Earth where I do not want you to be my witnesses.

Verse 8 is the key verse to understanding the mission, the birth and the growth of the Church. In 30 short years, the Church grew from an insignificant Jewish sect with a few hundred followers to a powerful force in the Roman Empire. How did this happen then? And what does this mean for us today? These are two intriguing sides of the same coin.

The mission of those first followers of Jesus depended ultimately on the authority of God. Jesus placed his own life within the sphere of God's authority and his disciples needed to do the same. They needed to understand that the times and seasons of their lives were with God. They were not to try to figure out all the specifics of the future – times and dates of events that were in God's hands, not theirs. The mission God had for them concerned a very different but specific emphasis and direction.

That's why Jesus said to his followers, **“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.”** This is an amazingly positive statement because our ability to witness for Jesus Christ rests on God's shoulders and not primarily on ours. Any ability we have to be witnesses is **not** dependent on us – on our abilities or our get-up-and-go or our pulling ourselves up by the proverbial boot straps. Jesus says God will give us the ability or power to be his witnesses.

Author and radio personality Garrison Keillor was asked to choose what he considered to be the five most important books in the world. You might be surprised to learn that he ranked the Book of Acts at the top of his list! I like Keillor's concise but potent summation of Acts. He said: “The flames lit on their little heads and bravely and dangerously went they onward” [Garrison Keillor, “My Five Most Important Books,” in the Life in Books section of *Newsweek* magazine (12-24-07), p. 17]. He was reflecting on Acts 2:1-4:

“When the day of Pentecost came, all the believers were gathered together in one place.

²Suddenly there was a noise from the sky which sounded like a strong wind blowing, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³Then they saw what looked **like tongues of fire which spread out and touched each person there.** ⁴**They were all filled with the Holy Spirit.**

Any and all authentic power within the Christian faith comes from the Holy Spirit living within us and not from our own power or steam. Let me put it this way:

- It is not until we are open to (or filled with) God the Holy Spirit that we are able, with God's help, to move any church forward into the world. What we are to accomplish in this church, for instance, will not be our own doing; it will be the doing of the Holy Spirit working through us. What we are to accomplish in this church and this community will be because we invite God the Holy Spirit to empower us in such a way that the impossible will become possible.
- If we can accomplish our vision and mission on our own, then the vision and mission is not from God.

After Jesus told his followers they would receive power for their mission when the Holy Spirit came on them, he then told them what their mission would be: “You will be **my witnesses** in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Our mission, too, is to be witnesses to the Risen Jesus -- in our individual lives and in our church life together. Our actions and our words are meant to give evidence that we are people who have a personal knowledge and experience of the Resurrected Jesus.

Some people say they primarily witness -- or perhaps only witness -- with their actions, not with their words. They say their faith is better “lived out than talked about.”

- Francis of Assisi was supposed to have said, “Preach the gospel at all times and, when necessary, use words.”
- When Stanley discovered Livingstone in Central Africa in the 1800s and had spent some time with him, he said, “If I had been with [Livingstone] any longer, I would have been compelled to be a Christian and he never spoke to me about it at all.”

Let me admit my difficulty about the culture in which we are now living with this kind of thinking that tells me I do not have to speak about my experience with the Risen Jesus. There is no doubt that good deeds, especially sacrificial ones, are looked upon favourably by the recipients of our helpful actions and maybe also by some others looking on. But, my friends, we live in a culture that has almost lost any reference point as to why we do what we do. More and more people know very little about Jesus Christ and would not necessarily feel compelled (as Stanley was) to become followers of Jesus **unless we tell them** our motivation for why we do what we do. **Does that make sense to you?** We live in a culture that does not relate to Jesus except in some vague “Christian” way. And the word “Christian” is becoming increasingly vague in our increasingly secular 21st-century culture in Canada.

How do you speak of your faith in Jesus of Nazareth? How do you speak about your experience with our Risen Lord? I came across some questions this week that caused me to think again about being a follower of Jesus:

- What if I really believed Jesus is risen and also Lord (as we say he is)?
- What if I really lived my life as if that were true?
- What would my life look like?
- What can I say about my experience of Jesus?

These are significant questions that perhaps I need to hear every day. Some more grist for the mill in our conversation over coffee, I think. And my door is always open to discuss these questions with you.

Jesus tells us we are to be his witnesses too -- here in Oriole-York Mills Church, in the city of Toronto, in Canada’s most difficult communities and also throughout the entire Earth. In other words, Jesus says to all of us too: there is no place on Earth where he does not want us to be his witnesses. Jesus promised he would fill us with the Holy Spirit to work with us to love, to serve and to tell others about our life with him – our Risen Lord.

This is the ever-widening circle of God’s mission for us. First, we are to be witnesses for Jesus in word and deed in our “Jerusalem” – in the spiritual centre of our world. So we are to begin as Jesus’ witnesses to each other in this congregation.

Second, we are to be witnesses for Jesus Christ in word and deed to our Judea – to the area surrounding us. I believe this includes Toronto as a whole. My friends, what might a focus on Toronto look like for us? More grist for this morning’s conversation time!.

Third, we are to be witnesses for Jesus in word and deed to our Samaria – to the outcasts of our day who are ignored and unwanted and unloved. Might this include, for one, supporting the new Don Valley refugee family coming in October from the Syria-Iraq border?

And fourth, we are to be witnesses for Jesus in word and deed to the whole world. That's why we support the mission concerns we do through our Mission and Community Support Team. That's why we are planning a Lunch and Learn in November about human trafficking here in Canada and in places around the world. That's why we encouraged and supported Larry Scott a year ago to go to Kenya to help with the Charles Mully children's ministry. We must believe that with God's help, even for our small congregation, there is no limit to our ministry. It is an ever-widening reality that can enliven us.

I have merely grazed the surface of being a witness this morning. As we continue to explore God's actions in the Book of Acts over the next while, we will unpack more and more of what it means for you and me as individuals and as a church community at OYM to be witnesses for Jesus Christ. If we love him, we are to be his witnesses by word and through service in our church community, in Toronto, among the unwanted and unloved in our city and then throughout all the world.

It is a true saying: “God does not call the equipped; rather, God equips the called.” In ourselves we do not possess the gifts and abilities or the strength needed to touch people with the love of God. That is why the Risen Jesus went to be with his Father. That way God could send the Holy Spirit to indwell his followers and to equip the Church with the power – the strength – necessary to do the mission Jesus calls us do.

My friends, God has called us to be witnesses to the life of the Risen Jesus within us through his Holy Spirit. Through the power of the Spirit on us, we are equipped to give evidence that, in Jesus Christ, people will discover

- a love they did not know even existed
- a hope they only dreamed of before
- and a peace they had never experienced before.

May this be so for me and for you. Amen.

Rev. Chris Miller
September 27, 2009