



August 28, 2011
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Can I Get a Witness?

Acts 1:8

Jesus said to them, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Introduction to the reading of the scripture:

This morning I'm going to do something I've tried teach other preachers to never do: I'm going to preach from a snip of scripture instead of an a responsibly coherent paragraph—what biblical scholars refer to as a "pericope." Here's why: I'd like out time together in this sermon to be something of a workshop on witnessing instead of a careful exposition of scripture. It's what I think will be most useful for us as Jesus' people as we take the first steps in the Year of Good News. So, for most of the next 25 minutes what we'll do work on how to actually be what Jesus said the Holy Spirit would empower us to do: be witnesses for Jesus.

Read Acts 1: 8.

Pray: Ask God's help to apply this word to ourselves.

Some of my most precious memories as a pastor are of ministry I've shared with African American brothers and sisters. In the 1990's I was part of the Tacoma Ministerial Alliance—the Black pastors in Tacoma—and when I was in Pittsburgh some of my closest colleagues and friends were the Black preachers and leaders. Pittsburgh is a wonderful city, and very friendly; but it isn't exactly warm, so when I wanted a hug from a fellow believer, I pretty much had to go to a Black church to get it. And I did that often.

As some of you know, one of the preaching conventions in the Black church is "call and response"—the pastor calls something out and the congregation responds. Kind of like what we do with "This is the word of the Lord" and "Thanks be to God." Only it tends to be more energetic. Sometimes it sounds kind of like this (in a white-guy kind of way ☺): "When I was lost, Jesus found me. When I was at the bottom, he lifted me up. When my life was at a dead end, he made an open door. When I prayed he answered me! Can I get a witness?!" And everyone who had ever been found or lifted up by Jesus, everyone who ever had Jesus answer a prayer, calls back, "Amen. I'm a witness!"

I think if we could hear Jesus calling to us, we'd hear him crying out, "Can I get a witness??" Chapel Hill Christian—Jim, Susan, Bob, Shelly, kids and grown-ups—I've

given you the Holy Spirit, you know me and love me, I've redeemed you, forgiven you, called you and given you an eternal destiny. Can I get a witness in your Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and all the world . . . or somewhere?" And we answer, "Who me? Lord, I'd really like to, but I don't know what to say. I know lots of things some people do and call it evangelism, but most of them embarrass me, and I think some of them embarrass you. I know I should be your witness, but I don't want to do it wrong so I don't do it."

What would it take to help you be ready to be a witness for Jesus? We tend to think that the solution would be lots of training and equipping. If we could just argue like John Lennox we think we'd be powerful evangelists, but since we know that Richard Dawkins would out-argue us, and maybe even make us look like dopes, we are afraid to witness. We tend to think that if we had a year or two of training in apologetics and had snappy answers to the really "BIG" questions or we'd be powerful witnesses—you know, answers to questions like "Why is there suffering and evil?" We tend to think that some program or formula that we've been trained in would be really powerful: like mastery of the four spiritual laws or the Kennedy Evangelism Explosion approach. We tend to think those things, but if we do we are mostly wrong. There is a place for all of that, and during the Year of Good News we're going to offer help with most of it. But the reality is this: most opportunities to witness for Jesus are much closer to home, much simpler, and really and truly already within your ability. What matters the most about your witness is already there inside you. Honest. I want to show you that this morning by helping you find out what's already in you so that you can make it available to others. I want to help you get things that are hidden down and inside you up and out so others can see them, too.

As I said at the beginning, this is going to mostly be a workshop—I'm not going to tell you what to say as a witness, I'm want to help you figure out what the Lord has already given you to say as his witness. So, would you please find the 3X5 card in your bulletin? Or find something in the pew racks or your purse to write on? Here's what we're going to do: I'll give you several minutes to write some things down, then you'll turn to 3-4 others to share what you wrote. That way, others can learn from you and you can learn from others. Then we'll reflect a bit as a whole congregation! Cool, don't you think? It will work—and it will mostly be pretty simple.

So, let's begin with this. On your piece of paper please finish this sentence (it's up on the screens for your convenience) [If you are reading this sermon, please stop at this point and write out your answers—that's almost certainly more helpful than just thinking about it]:

I love Jesus because . . .

Or, **What I love about Jesus is . . .**

Your answer doesn't have to be fancy, just true. This isn't what you think you should love about Jesus, or what you think the "right" answer is. It's just your answer:

why do you love Jesus? People who like you and trust you might want to know the truth about that.

Sometimes when I ask Christians what God has done for them, they tell me Jesus has forgiven their sins. I always want to ask, "Yeah? Great. Which one?" If we're going to witness to others, we have to be specific, to tell the truth about our own experiences with the Lord. So, please complete this sentence, please:

Something Jesus has forgiven me for, that I'm willing to tell a good friend, is . . .

What Jesus has done for me, personally, is . . .

Really: what has Jesus done for you that has mattered in your life? How has following him, being saved by him, changed your life?

Something I believe about Jesus is . . .

Here's a reason I believe that . . .

Americans love to say things like, "I'm very spiritual, but not religious" and "You don't have to go to church to be a Christian." By which they mean that they kind of believe in some kind of God, and they don't see why going to church, being part of an "institution" (yuck), has anything to do with living God's way. So, why do you go to church—why does church (i.e., God's people in Christ) matter to you? Finish this sentence:

Church is an important part of my life because . . .

People I know need Jesus because . . .

Please think about the people you know and care about: the people you work with, go to school with, who live in your neighborhood, who are part of your family. Why do they need Jesus? Until you have an answer for that, you'll never take the risks of being a witness to them about Jesus. Why do professional middle class people who take good vacations, drive nice cars, live in nice houses and have the corner office need Jesus? They think they've got life all taken care of—why do you believe they need Jesus? What about poor people, or just salt-of-the-earth workers, need Jesus? Why do the kids you hang out with, and the ones you don't, need Jesus?

Now, please turn to 2 or 3 people nearby and share whatever you are comfortable sharing from what you've written. If you aren't sitting near someone, please move and find someone to share with. If you aren't comfortable sharing that's okay, just say, "I think I'll pass today." PLEASE: no sermons and no teaching! Take just one or two minutes each to share. Listen to each other. I'll check in with you in about 5 minutes. Ready, set, go.

Thank you. Now, I'm going to come out into the congregation and see what people said, or heard, about themselves and Jesus.

So, what do you think? Is that the kind of thing people need to hear about Jesus? Would these kinds of things be meaningful, useful witnesses to unchurched people?

There is tremendous power in the simple, authentic witness of a nonprofessional, unpaid, Christian. Most of the time most of the people you know will trust your experience and your witness vastly more than what any pastor will ever say. They will trust and think about what comes out of your heart and your life vastly more than any iron-clad reasoning, or ideas, or “truths,” or what we like to think of as “proofs.” And, the younger the unchurched person is, the more likely that is to be the case.

I heard a great—and unsettling—interview with the head of Public Relations of the Mormon Church this past week. The interviewer asked him how people could learn about and understand the Mormon faith. He said something like, “The best way to understand our faith is through our people. We are confident that when people get to know a Mormon, they will understand our faith.” What I thought was, “You are certainly correct. Your theology won’t stand rigorous intellectual or archeological examination, but Mormons are generally wonderfully moral people, great neighbors and first-rate citizens.” And he is entirely on target as he thinks about how most modern Americans go about discerning what’s true and what’s not: they decide on the basis of experience, not ideas. What people we know and love and respect say, and what they do, are very persuasive to us. It isn’t everything, but it’s a ton. And the best witness most of us will ever give to someone else will be what we worked on today: what we love about Jesus, what he’s forgiven us for that really matters, the difference he’s made in our lives, what we really believe about him, why church matters to us, and why we think other people need him.

The question is this: Do you think people need Jesus? Would you be willing to take the risk of telling others about him? Of being his witness—right in your own family, with your best friends and co-workers, the people in your neighborhood, the kids at school? [Song/video fades in during these last four sentences.] If you won’t take that risk, who will? Who should? Do you believe people need the Lord? Jesus is asking, “Can I get a witness?”