

Witnessing - Testimony

May 4, 2008
Edwards (Knox) United Church
Seventh Sunday of Easter

Acts 1:1-11

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#)

Luke 24:44-53

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#)

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The Rev. Dr. George Hermanson

One of the ideas we explored on our study leave is how the church is in continuous experimentation. The church has gone through and is going through questions of how shall we live our faith? What does it mean to witness and give testimony? If you check out Wondercafe.ca you will find both lament and hope over where are we as a church. A typical comment of lament is this:

Maybe church, as we know it, is a thing of the past and 100 years from now on a "then and now" thread someone will post "Do you remember Churches? Do you remember God?"

Every month a new book comes out to talk about what is needed to make the church more relevant. One is Diane Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, which is full of hope. We have gone through seasons of trying to define what does it mean to testify to our faith. What is the appropriate witness in our time? Each season brings opportunities and restrictions.

In our readings from Luke and Acts we get some hints on how to respond. There is a rhythm to the response needed. And that response is the thesis of Bass's book.

The first level is one of realism. That will contain some lament for the past and for loss. In Luke the early church is moving from a Jewish/Christian community to a gentile church. There is loss. In fact, the metaphor is one where Jesus is a distant memory and they have to find within their narrative a rationale for their witness. Then there is the fact that their testifying is dangerous. The church in that time was under attack by the Romans.

After their experience with Jesus they are now on their own. They are left with memory and hope. The discernment process is built on being open to the presence of the Spirit of God. This begins in prayer, in the community of worship. They don't run off immediately for they are told to wait in prayer. From this we learn that it takes time and prayer to find one's mission, for a community to find its mission. Mission is based on reflection and examination - of asking what are the needs, what are our strengths? In prayer one finds their strength, and prayer and reflection builds the communities strength by knowing one another's strengths. It is to be open to collective power and insight. Individual insights are built up when they are shared and are open to the insights of others. There is a strength for the individual in a shared vision. It takes time for this to happen.

Waiting is never easy. It creates uncertainty. Waiting takes time, and we are afraid to waste time. However, the action of prayer and discernment locates us in the activity of God in our world. We join in the reality of God who has an aim for the future of the world, a movement toward beauty, compassion, and justice. This can change our relationship to time, for time becomes a gift. There is a season and trust in others, and in the Spirit of God, who is at work in many guises of beauty. Prayer and discernment

can aid us in seeing that the aim of God is here, in this moment, luring the universe toward more beauty. Prayer invites us to join with the process of hope that is there before we are. It is important to begin our discernment by remembering it is God's mission not ours. We do participate in it. We join the mission that is God's and then ours and others.

To begin to witness one has to discern what the issues are and how to approach them. If you have been following the so called controversy about Obama and his minister Jeremiah Wright you have noticed how close to the surface racism is. Wright gets attacked in ways that no white preacher would. He exhibits the classical black prophetic preaching. Note his name. Some years ago Cornell West wrote a book called *Race Matters*. In it he showed how racism is still alive in most of us. Racism is destructive of people, communities, and nations. It is based on fallacies that become political premises. We see this in Canada in our dealing with First Nation people. In such an atmosphere it is difficult to raise questions for there is a difficult and subtle line between legitimate criticism and racist response. We need to discern the agenda of those who under the guise of criticism are actually putting forth a political attack. In this case it clearly racists. Yet we must also raise questions about those under attack.

We are in exciting times where are called upon to rethink how we witness and give testimony to the activity of God in our world. Part of our problem in witnessing is a failure of nerve. This failure comes about because there has been a history of the church claiming to have all the truth. The church has tried to impose its way on others. The church requires a new vision of what it means to witness. To witness is to be humble in our claims. This means we offer our insights that are grounded in discerning what is at stake for our society and environment. This is to listen to others. To gain perspective from the many voices who are calling us to fresh understanding of what it means to have a sustainable reality. When there is mutual listening we can also be bold in what we offer.

Testimony is not neutral or disinterested, but it seeks to look at the world from the perspective of the Christian faith. We know that we have insight that is valuable for the care of the world. Our society needs a new vision of what it means to care. At our best we can offer that. It can be heard when it is offered humbly and in the spirit of persuasion.

The early church had a vision of paradise. This is not some future world or after death. When one was baptized they were baptized into to the reality of God which is paradise in the here and now. It is this world God has called good. It is humanity that God trusts to nurture the goodness built into life, to tease it out and to live it. The image of paradise as this world, and being baptized into gave the early community courage to respond in nonviolent ways to the violence around them.

This vision of our partnership with God takes time to take root in us. It takes time to trust that the Spirit of God is at work in our world. It takes new eyes to see the outbreaks of beauty in our world. To arrive at such eyes of discerning love at work takes prayer and openness. When we engage in deep reflection and prayer our imaginations can go beyond the boundaries of the world's expectation. We can imagine ways of living in harmony with our environment and one another. The image of paradise as this world, and we are baptized into it, can give us the imagination to testify that our mission is to work with others of good will for the common good. We witness our faith by our living.

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