

First Presbyterian Church
Rev. Lou Nyiri
October 8, 2023
“It’s a Beautiful Day”

[Deuteronomy 6:1-9 / Luke 24: 13-35](#)

Let us Pray:

Come, O Holy Spirit, come.
Come as the fire and burn,
Come as the wind and cleanse,
Come as the light and reveal,
Convict us, Convert us, Consecrate us...until we are wholly thine.

And now, Lord, my prayer is simply this:
That the words of my mouth
And the words of all our hearts will be found pleasing and acceptable to you,
for you are our rock and our redeemer...Amen.

Sermon

I think the church is a beautiful place – and I’m guessing you do as well – otherwise, we’d all be somewhere else other than in this place doing something else during this hour – like reading the Sunday New York Times over a scone and coffee on the back porch or taking a walk on a hiking trail.

While the church is a beautiful place, and *everyone* is invited to be a part of it...it’s good to recall that no one will come until we invite them.

Thus, I have a few questions for you:
Who do you know you might invite to be part of this faith community we call the church?
Who do you talk with – who do you walk with on an almost daily basis to whom you might extend an invitation to be a part of this exciting adventure we call faith?
Who could you invite?

Now, before we start thinking I could never do that, let me suggest that it’s not the same as what the business world terms ‘making a cold call’ – where one randomly phones people to get someone to buy something which, perhaps, the caller isn’t even sure they want to buy.

In fact, let’s rethink that right now and recognize that when it comes to faith – we never need to sell God – we never need to defend Jesus – we never need to explain the Holy Spirit – if 2,000 plus years of faith have taught us anything, maybe it’s this: God can sell God’s self...Jesus

can defend Jesus' self...and the Holy Spirit is in the business of explaining what the Holy Spirit does...we can have responses to question, however, we are never doing the "selling."

It's not up to us to make the sale (so to speak) – rather it's up to us to tell the story of how our lives have been impacted by this greater faith story – then invite others to come and see for themselves.

Scottish theologian James Torrence writes of the faith experience, "~~[faith] is not so much dependent on *our* experience of the Christ, rather~~ it is **the** Christ of our experience [that matters most]."

The Emmaus bound disciples encountered the risen Christ – their hearts burned, and their eyes were opened – then they went back to the people they knew to tell them what had happened.

They had encountered the Christ – the one who brings hope into lives – the one who takes death and creates life – the one who declares new life is available today...

The Emmaus bound disciples encountered a life-changing moment with Jesus the Christ which shaped who they are and who they were becoming, then they simply told their story and how it had been impacted by Christ's story.

That's our call – to bear witness to what we have experienced and report what we have seen.

Associate Professor of Preaching at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur Georgia, Anna Carter Florence discusses in her book Preaching as Testimony, how "testimony is not perception; it is the report itself, or the narration of what has happened."

The focus is not on what is *seen* but on what is *said*.

It is an act of communication between two persons – both of whom inherit two distinct roles: There is the one who testifies – who bears witness by sharing what they have seen and who seeks to justify the report and;

There is the one who hears the testimony – the one who has not seen but who hears the witness's report and forms an opinion about the testimony.

It is the hearing which is critical – for it is in the hearing of one's testimony that the decision is made as to whether the testimony is true or false – testimony involves a movement from seeing to understanding, and, perhaps, believing. (Preaching as Testimony, p. 62ff)

Testimony calls for a decision on the part of the hearer as to how they will be moved because of the testimony. The complication lies in the reality that a decision must be made not from definable fact – rather from credibility of witness. Everything hinges on the credibility of the witness. Remember, testimony is not the event itself – rather it is a report of the event.

This is why in court – lawyers establish the witness’s credibility.

You have to believe the character of the one who sits on the witness stand – the one who offers testimony – for without it – what is there to believe.

Everybody listens when an “Expert Witness” speaks – for this person is one established as credible in an area of expertise thereby giving them solid standing upon which they speak.

Testimony includes not only a witness’ words – also their acts – the things which are living proof of conviction and devotion.

Perhaps this is where we get the phrase, “who you are speaks so loud I can’t hear what you’re saying.”

“The difference,” Anna Carter Florence writes, “between true and false witness is in the engagement of the witness – ‘the engagement of a pure heart and an engagement to the death’ – which must be why the Greek word for witness is *martyr*.”

The Iona Scotland community’s story begins with a prince from an Irish noble family named Columba. In his youth Columba became a priest and a missionary monk, founding several monastic houses in Ireland before a tribal feud forced him into exile. In 563, he and twelve companions arrived on Iona, and for the next 34 years, Columba and his monks, used Iona as a base from which to pursue an active missionary outreach throughout the Western Isle and up into the northeastern parts of what is now Scotland.

Their missionary method was to go out in small groups, set up their huts amid their pagan neighbors (Columba called them “colonies of heaven). They sought to attract people to the Gospel by *their* way of life, their care for all, and the preaching and practice of their faith.

One story told of Columba is his interaction at castle of King Brude, near modern Inverness. The pagan monarch had given strict orders that they were not to be admitted, but when Columba raised his arm and made the sign of the cross, it was said that bolts fell out and gates swung open, permitting the strangers to enter.

Impressed by such power, it is said, the King opened his home – and his soul – and as he listened to them, he became a devoted follower of Jesus Christ and ever after held Columba in high regard.

It is said that the King asked St. Columba, “Why should I believe?”

To which Columba replied, “Oh King, if you just believe you will have wonder upon wonder and every wonder true.”

While our words may never exude the kind of power to cause door hinges to fall out and gates to open, may we never forget that we do have influence and credibility with others – a credibility and influence which God can use to open doors so that grace upon grace & wonder upon wonder might be discovered in a life.

Who better than you to invite the very people you know to be part of this journey – a journey whose sole purpose is to discover *wonder upon wonder & every wonder true* as we discern God's place & call in our lives – who better to invite the people you know than you – the one whom they encounter on an almost daily basis – for these are the very people who know you best – the ones with whom you've established credibility – the ones to whom your witness will speak – who better?

This good news message is too good to keep to ourselves.

Our lives ...our care...our practice of faith...our witness...our testimony is that which will attract people to the Gospel message.

Once their hearts burned within them, the Emmaus bound disciples realized they couldn't keep this news to themselves and they knew they had to tell the others – and while they're telling the disciples what happened on the road and how he'd been made known to them in the breaking of the bread – Jesus himself stands among them – in the very next section – the concluding section of Luke's gospel we're told how Jesus comes to them and he opened their minds so as to understand the scriptures – he then tells them in verses 48, "You are witnesses of these things."

And they told the story to others – those others told the story – and now the story is in our houses and it's our turn to tell the story to others.

As witnesses to this good news message, we are called to tell the story through our testimony.

The power of testimony opens us up to share the Gospel message and takes the pressure off to have all the answers.

The power of testimony allows God to do that which only God can do – make the story come alive in personal ways.

Hopefully the following story will highlight what I mean.

I'm standing on a balcony, in the great neo-gothic sanctuary of The East Liberty Presbyterian Church, Pittsburgh, PA. I'm video-taping the Pittsburgh Seminary's 1994 commencement speaker. This man was a prominent person in the life of the Presbyterian Church (USA). He had graduated from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and was an ordained Presbyterian Church (USA) Minister of Word & Sacrament. He was highly influential with an impeccable character.

As he addressed the graduating class of soon-to-be ordained Ministers of Word and Sacrament, he shared about how he had learned over the years to stay faithful to the story God was writing on his heart. He talked about how the greatest lesson he'd learned in life and ministry was to tell the Gospel story – to tell how the story influenced him – not to explain the story in an effort

to prove the story – rather to tell the story...to trust and allow God to do with the story that which only God can do.

He talked about believing in the possibility of Holy Ground. A concept he described as “The distance between the speaker’s mouth and the listener’s ears. [In this space] God can and will do what God needs to do in order that the message might be heard.” It may not happen immediately – though it will happen.

The speaker continued his story by telling about how something he said early in his ministry came back in a monumental way. He had received a letter from an individual who described how his words had brought him out of the lowest point in his life. It was a dark place. There seemed to be nowhere to turn and hope was nothing but a faint whisper on the brink of extinction. As this individual sat in an apartment mindlessly watching television words spoken to him as a child by this man were heard on the television...

“It’s a beautiful day in the neighborhood...a beautiful day for a neighbor...would you be mine, could you be mine, won’t you be my neighbor...”

The commencement speaker was Fred Rogers – and he realized from that letter the words he spoke were transformed by God in such a way the writer of this letter went from mindlessly watching television to picking up the telephone and making a call which began the turnaround in his life.

This is the power of testimonial language - one person witnessing to what they have seen...to what they believe is possible and allowing space for the listener to hear the witness’s report and form an opinion about the testimony.
And in that space – God will do that which only God can do.

We don’t have to prove a thing.
We simply have to share what we’ve experienced.
We simply have to talk about the journey.

As the body of Christ – the church – we are on a journey and *everyone* is invited...though no one will come if we don’t invite them.

May our hearts burn – may God’s grace come alive – may we share the story with others so they too might experience the Good News.

Amen & Alleluia!