

“Powerful Witness”

Rev. Greg Watling

First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

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Texts: Acts 2:42-47 and John 10: 1-10

Want a sure-fire way to make people uncomfortable in a church like ours? Have a three-week series where the word “witness” is part of the title of your sermon! In our tradition, witnessing hasn’t been a part of our recent history—at least not witnessing the way you’re probably thinking of it. For many in our churches, witnessing is something the Jehovah Witnesses do, or other more evangelical churches. The image is of people going door to door to witness their faith. I’m not advocating that in this series. However, we sometimes are so afraid of those images that we say nothing at all about our faith, about our church, about our beliefs, or anything that someone might find offensive. When it comes to matters of faith and religion, many of us just take the fifth. If we say nothing, then no one will be repulsed by what we say. The thing is, there is much that is positive, love-based, and good news to share with the world. Our staying silent isn’t doing anyone any favors. How do we navigate not wanting to do one thing, but knowing that our silence isn’t helpful either? With the help of some difficult scriptures (I wanted to make this even more fun!) I want to explore with you what witnessing could be in our tradition. I submit to you that there are a lot of good things we can witness to in the way of Jesus Christ and this church. And by doing so, many will benefit.

First, we have to look at the meaning of the word witness. Outside of church world, we often think of witness as someone who watched a crime happen and is a witness in

court. Not exactly a powerfully good image of witness here, either. Something bad has to happen and be witnessed by someone so that the perpetrator gets punished. We also witness one another signing important papers, which can be helpful part of the process for people to make their final known—for example. Those documents can be some of the most important documents we ever do, and witnessing the signatures assists that process.

The definition of the word “witness” is what you might imagine: 1) a person who sees and event, typically a crime or accident, take place, 2) evidence; proof, 3) (of a person) openly profess one’s religious faith. I’m sure there are others, but you get the basic idea. It’s that third one that makes us uncomfortable. We don’t want to openly profess our religious faith. We think it’s off-putting and shoving religion down someone’s throat. There are a host of examples of people doing that. That is true. At the same time, what else do we openly profess?

Have you heard about the new restaurant in town, for example? A new place opens, or you try a place for the first time and the food and the service are excellent. You can’t help but tell people about what a great experience you had. How about your golf game? Your pickleball outing? What do you invite people to be part of in other aspects or events in your life? Are there any lessons to be learned that can apply to talking about your church?

Before we get there, I’d like to look at the two Bible stories for today. The first can make people uncomfortable as it seems that Jesus is shunning other religions, including his native Judaism. A study of John’s gospel, one of the more difficult of our gospels, reminds us that the community to which John wrote was one that had been expelled from

their synagogue for belief in Jesus. They were hurting, they were a small group, they could have felt lost and they needed someone or something to remind them of their worth and their place among people of the Way. I'll admit straight out that some of the language in John's gospel is not helpful in today's context, but if you look at it through another lens, you might see that it still has a message for us today. Thanks to Gerard Sloyan's commentary on the passage that provides the basis for our discussion (*John: Interpretation Bible Series Commentary*).

In Chapter 9 Jesus found the man who was ejected from the assembly (verses 34-35) and opened up the possibility of belief in himself: Jesus. This community outsider can become an insider, the Gospel maintains. Now that is something to which you and I can witness. We are part of a church that always believes that someone who is an outsider somewhere else can become an insider here. We practice an open community that literally says every Sunday, "no matter who you are...you are welcome here" and to the best of our ability we practice that. Knowing that the audience of chapter ten is people who have been outsiders, maybe the language of shepherd, sheep, listening for my voice, and the safety of the pen make sense. Sadly, most Christians have used this passage as a way to exclude those who don't hear Jesus' voice, or those who don't believe the same way. In the passage, Jesus is praising the solicitous behavior of the shepherd (the protector) for his sheep contrasted with the thief and the robber.

Further, we often have reduced faith to individualism (a direct result of our individualistic culture) whereas the Bible is a communal document. "The separating of individuals from their families stalks the pages of the New Testament. Still, the divisions

spoken of are communal, rather than individual...the author of John has as his greater concern a group of believers which finds itself cut off from a larger faith group. The John community is not a "sect" of Judaism or Christianity in the modern sociological sense. It does, however, experience all the pain of not being at one with the larger social entity, the Jewish people. It will not follow a stranger, namely someone who tries to lead it in a direction the group cannot go in. It's amazing how the reading of a scripture changes when we read it from the perspective of the left out, the lost and the left behind, rather than a position of superiority. Same words, but entirely different meaning.

Sloyan also reminds us that, "No Christian confession or group should indulge lightly in declaring others "outside the fold." Their being of the same fold with all who bear the Christian name should be a matter of hope and prayer." I would take that further and remind us that God' job is judgment, ours is not. Instead, we are to be a community of love and to the best of our ability include the very people that the rest of the world would exclude. That's challenging work, and in order to do it, our faith must be deep so that we have someone/something to draw from to do the work that is ours to do.

The second scripture from Acts speaks of the first Christian communities and how they held "everything in common." Again, we put our own lenses on and wonder how we would do such a thing and then we dismiss it because it seems impractical. Perhaps, but if you know the context of the first Christians, they tended to be poor, outcast, suspect, and even threatened or arrested. Without the safety and support of community, the early Christians would never have made it. Maybe we don't need to take the story literally, but perhaps we could be reminded of the importance of community in a nation that is

fracturing community more and more every day. We find new ways to exclude, judge, condemn and destroy other people every day. What if there was a place that worked diligently to “become the best version of ourselves possible” and who welcomed those who were not welcomed elsewhere?

If you’re following me, then you’ll know that I’m making several points:

- 1) We need to read the Bible from the perspective of the first century of the common era to begin to understand what Jesus and his early church were all about. Our failure to do so makes the Gospel more about us than it is about Jesus AND it often perverts the Gospel to destructive ends.
- 2) The vast majority of the Bible is written from the perspective of those left out, lost, downtrodden, judged, etc. We see not only from Jesus, but from the Old Testament, God’s love for and support of those very people that many churches shun today.
- 3) The greatest thing we have to offer the world is community—powerful community that to the best of our ability includes everyone and struggles with ourselves when we find that difficult. We examine our motives, check our egos at the door (most of the time), and seek what we believe is most just for ourselves and others. Real community is hard to find in our culture today.
- 4) Our relative silence means that those who don’t have a home in a community—let alone a faith community—does a disservice. People may reject us. Okay. But for those who cannot find a spiritual home with a deep sense of community, we could be a lifesaver.

I’m sure there are other points to be made, maybe some I didn’t even realize I was making. All I’m trying to say is that powerful witness is sometimes as simple as sharing your love for this church community with others, just the same way you share good news of a good restaurant. Nobody needs Bible verses thrown at them to convert them. Nobody needs to be told what else is wrong with them. Instead, how about we begin where the Bible begins with the good that is in the world. We’ll talk more about that in a few weeks, but in the meantime, consider what good you might do by witnessing the joy you find here.

In this place. Among these people. Imperfect as we are, but where love and compassion are the goals to which we strive. In Jesus' name.

It's time our society to be reminded that there is a place for them. Maybe it's not here, but maybe, just maybe, for someone who is hurting we are exactly the community they have been looking for. And Jesus reminds us that those who need to hear his voice, through us, will hear.

Powerful witness...to the love and grace and mercy and justice of Jesus Christ. Could this be something that is ours to do?

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.