

Text: [Luke 19:37-48](#)

Date: April 7, 2019 – Lent 5

Title: “Witness: Part I”

Theme: Witness is about true words and true actions on behalf of God.

Intro

So far, we’ve talked about prayers, presence, gifts and service
And their importance to growing in faith and discipleship
This week, we’re going to be talking about one more of our membership
vows – witness
We promise to glorify God with our witness

And it may seem odd, this word witness
We added it to the liturgy officially in 2008
But the hymnal was never updated to reflect that change
We show it on the screens, but when we do a baptism and I’m looking at
the hymnal, I always have to remember to add it in

It feels like a bit of insider knowledge, kind of like when I was president of
an honor society in college and you had to know the motto, because
it wasn’t supposed to be written down

The word itself has a bit of that insider quality
But nonetheless it’s incredibly important

I’ve been thinking a lot about what witness means lately
And I have a feeling once we break it down a bit, you may realize that you
have been too –
it’s been at the center of any number of conversations I’ve had
So much that I want to spend the next two weeks on it

Sermon

There is one word that I hope I will never be called by my kids
Do you know what that word is?
Hypocrite.

I imagine some of you have been there, done that.
I think it probably happens to nearly everyone at some point.
You know why? Because it's most likely true.

There are times when all of us fail to live up to the values we say we hold.
And young people are typically very good at calling on us on it
Now, we can say that young people are more sensitive to hypocrisy
because when we're young we tend to think in terms of black or white
and fail to see the shades of gray we discern as we're older
And to some degree that's true
But there are other times when it's also true that, well, we're just hypocrites!

And that should frighten us
Why do I say that?
Because over and over again, Jesus' harshest words are reserved for
religious hypocrites
That's particularly true in Matthew's gospel, where he constantly argues
with the Pharisees – read Matthew 23, where Jesus says over and
over, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!"

For Jesus, being a hypocrite is all about missing the point
About getting the details of practice right – down to the letter
But failing to understand the bigger implications of God's grace and mercy

2

To some degree, when we take vows to glorify God through our witness,
it's about making sure our words and actions line up
It's about living with integrity
It's being careful to make sure we're not missing the point

I don't think that there's anything more important in the life of faith
Again, it's something Jesus spoke about constantly
Making sure what's on the inside is reflected on the outside

In these past few weeks, since the General Conference
I've spoken with folks who are more progressive, concerned about what
attending a United Methodist Church means in terms of their witness
– especially when it comes to their gay friends or family members

And I know that if the vote had gone the other way, I would have been having similar conversations with people on the other side
I've spoken with other folks who are having hard conversations with friends, neighbors and family who have heard about the debates in the UMC and have to defend their decision to be here, on way or the other

I know that for me, the past month has clarified my thinking about what I want my own witness to be
And realizing, along with many others, that for too long I've been quiet about questions that are important to me

3

Witness is an important concept throughout the New Testament
We see it in Paul's letters as he debates matters of faith and practice
We see it in Acts during disagreements in the church
We see it in the letters to the churches at the beginning of the book of Revelation

Today's scripture is all about witness
The witness of the crowds – a portion of this is actually the Palm Sunday story – minus the palms (Luke has no palms)
So the crowds have come out to greet Jesus as he enters the city
Their witness is to welcome Jesus as king

And the reaction of the religious authorities, the Pharisees, is this: "tell them to stop"
Sometimes our witness will evoke a strong reaction from people around us

Jesus' own witness is also all through this episode
He looks over Jerusalem, this place he knows he is going to die, and he weeps over it
Then he prophesies over it – he foretells its destruction at the hands of the Romans – which came to pass in 70 AD when the city and the Temple were totally and utterly demolished

Jesus turns his eyes in particular toward the Temple
Where the moneychangers are taking advantage of people on the
exchange rates between Roman and Jewish money
And others are selling sacrificial animals at inflated prices
And he says, “this isn’t what faith is supposed to be about” – “you’ve turned
a house of prayer into a den of thieves”

This story is all about witness – about the places where true words about
God and true actions on behalf of God are happening – and the
places where they aren’t

According to the scripture, “people were spellbound” by what Jesus had to
say

Why? Because Jesus was a teacher unlike any other
God was powerfully with him – because in fact, God was powerfully IN him
His words and his actions were true, they were in alignment
His witness was credible, believable, and worthy of people’s trust

4

Our witness is just as much about who we are as what we do
None of us gets it right all the time
But it’s important that we try

I feel like we’re at the very edge of losing a whole generation
This is a rough time for the capital C church
Between scandals, abuse and the pervasive sense that the church is anti-
LGBT,
we have a lot to do to convince people that we’re worth listening to

I never despair that Jesus has the answers
That people want to hear what he has to say
But they won’t want to hear it from us, unless our witness is like his
Credible, believable, and worthy of trust

True words and true actions on behalf of God
That’s what the world needs

How do I know that?
I see it right here in the scripture

When the people are crying out, telling the truth about Jesus
“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”
And the religious leaders are telling Jesus to shut them down,
Jesus says, “I can’t.”
“If these were to keep silent, then the rocks themselves would cry out.”

That’s the image.
The rocks themselves crying out.
I read that as a message:
if Jesus can’t find some witnesses who can speak and live true on his
 behalf, he’ll look for others
It doesn’t matter who they are – Jesus will take rocks if need be!
But someone’s got to speak and live true to what they believe

5

This week, here’s the challenge:
Each night, before you go to bed, take some time to review your day
Ask yourself: today, how did I do at living true to what I believe?
Where did I do well? Where did I fall short?
Pray for wisdom to make different choices / better choices tomorrow

The world needs witnesses who will live and speak true to what they
 believe
Who understand what Jesus asks of them
Who stand up for justice, righteousness, mercy and love
People who not only get it
But live it

Imagine what the world would look like if all the people who went to church
 this weekend
Really lived as Christ’s church all week
Speaking and living true to what we believe

Jesus will call upon the rocks as witnesses if need be
But he’d rather it be you and me

Amen.

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