

Testify

a sermon based on

1 Corinthians 11-9 & John 1:29-42

and delivered on
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at

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

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And John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.” (Jn 1:32-34 NRSV)

“And John testified...” John testified how God had confirmed the sign that had been promised for him to recognize the Son of God. “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (Jn 1:29b NRSV) I actually like the King James Version a little better, “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.” (Jn 1:29b KJV) There’s something about “behold” rather than “here” or “look.” It’s just so much more profound.

“This is the one,” John says, “who is greater than I... because he was before me.” (Jn 1:30) This all happened as John the Evangelist records, the day after Jesus had presented himself for baptism – the day after John the Baptist would have humbly refused to baptize Jesus, saying, “I’m unworthy to baptize you. I need you to baptize me.” (Mt. 3:11, 13) That’s my paraphrase.

John had been calling people to repentance. John had been preaching forgiveness. John had been calling people to righteousness. John had been preparing people to look for the Lord. There’s a certain irony, here. John the Baptist probably knew Jesus. They were only six months apart in age. They were cousins. Whether it was second cousins or third cousins twice removed we don’t know. We do know that they were related. Had they played together as children?

John had spent some time in the wilderness. We don’t know how long. Did he recognize Jesus as his cousin? Again, we don’t know. But what we do know is that having seen the Holy Spirit rest upon him like a dove, he recognized “the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” And he told people! That’s important. He didn’t keep it to himself. He sent his own followers to hear Jesus’ – first Andrew who then told Simon Peter “We have found the Messiah.” (Jn 1:41b-42) John testified. Andrew testified. Peter testified. Each testified in turn because of what was revealed by the one before. Because of that testimony, they got to meet Jesus and experience his grace first hand.

We need to be realistic. Many (if not most) of the people who’d come to hear John preach and to be baptized were probably satisfied with that. John himself was skeptical of the Pharisees and Sadducees who came out to be baptized; and even called them a “brood of vipers” (Mt 3:7) But were they so different from the others? How many of the others were going out just to make sure they had their bases covered? Don’t get me wrong, obviously some if not most were sincerely seeking to be righteous; but it depended on them to “bear fruits worthy of repentance.” (Mt. 3:8) Maybe some were looking for God’s anointed – the Messiah. Why?

We’re told that those baptized by John in the Jordan did so, “confessing their sins.” (Mt 3:6b) We’re they looking for a fresh start or a “from here on out?” What did they think when they heard John say of Jesus, that this is the Lamb of God who **takes away the sins of the world?** *Takes away*, that’s powerful stuff. Isn’t it? They needed John’s testimony to hear and to experience Jesus.

In case you haven’t noticed, John the Baptist (and I know Baptists named John) – but John the Baptizer isn’t walking around anymore. Neither is Andrew. Neither is Simon Peter. Neither is... You get the idea. So, who is there to give that testimony? Is it up to missionaries and televangelists? Who told Andrew? John, whom he knew. Who told Peter? Andrew, his brother.

Many of us get nervous about testifying. Maybe we’re even suspicious of people who do. What’s the motive? Is this really good news?

Jim Abrahamson tells the story about eight-year old Debbie. After listening to the famed evangelist Chuck Swindoll on the radio, she asked her younger brother, David, “Do you know Jesus?”

Now, David was expecting a new twist on the story and said, “No.”

So, Debbie continued, “Sit still because this is really scary.” Then after explaining the Gospel in her eight-year-old understanding and vernacular, she (as Jim says in telling the story) “popped the question.” “When you die, do you want to go to heaven to be with Jesus, God, your Mommy and Daddy and your big sister, or do you want to go to the lake of fire to be with the Devil and bank robbers?”

After pondering a moment, David said, “I want to stay right here.”¹

Isn't that what often comes to mind when we think about giving a testimony? Scaring the hell out of people, so that they'll accept Jesus? Something just seems wrong with that. The truth is that that sort of testimony is probably why so many people answer like David – saying that they're content as things are.

Part of the reluctance – and even fear – that many Christians have with giving testimony is that we don't want to feel like hypocrites. Notice I said “we don't want to *feel* like hypocrites,” even though we act like hypocrites. I'm including myself in this. We say that we love Jesus. We say that we believe that he is indeed the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, but then we keep it to ourselves. Maybe we want to talk about Jesus' love and mercy, but we just can't share it. Why is that?

You know the saying, “Jesus is the answer.” Do you believe that? Well, what's the question?! What is Jesus the answer for? He's the answer for our sin. Right? He's the one who takes it away. So how can we testify to Jesus' if we don't acknowledge sin? Our own? And those who don't even know they need the answer?

We know that Jesus warned us not to be judgmental. How can we point out the speck in another's eye when we have logs in our own? Except, what Jesus says is to “first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye.” (Mt 7: 5 NRSV) That's the reason we're called to testify. We're called to testify so that others can be freed. And yet it seems as if our eleventh commandment is that “Thou shalt not offend.”

As we heard earlier in that passage from 1 Corinthians that as the testimony of Christ is strengthened among you – among us – that we will receive the spiritual gifts that will strengthen us to the end so that we might be blameless. (1 Cor. 1:6-7) Our testimony comes in how we live as those who know our sins. Just as I am, Jesus loves me; but that doesn't mean he loves keeping me just as I am. Did that make sense?

This is one of the main reasons the church is in decline. Not that we're not beating people up enough about their sin, but we allow people to wallow in sin without even pointing them to a solution. It's as if we see the “kick me” sign on someone's back and never stop to tell him why he's being kicked so that he has to wonder why he can't get away from those boots on his rear end.

Here's the good news. I don't think that God expects most of us to go stand on the corner of State and Main in Rockford calling people out for their sin. There was a guy that used to do that at NIU when I was a student there. I don't know anyone who spent much time actually listening to him. Most of our testimony is going to be in how we live. For those who knew us when, they'll notice the difference and maybe ask, “Why?” Sometimes it means telling about what we used to be as we live lives worthy of repentance. (i.e. taking the log out of our eye and acknowledging it). Think about it – when we see someone who's lost a lot of weight or quit smoking, what do we do? We ask “How'd you do it?” Right? Why? Sometimes it's out of curiosity, but a lot of time it's because we want to know for ourselves. Right?

¹ Edward K Rowell and Bonnie L Steffen, *Humor for Preaching and Teaching: From Leadership Journal and Christian Reader* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1998) 64.

Jesus didn't skirt sin in people's lives. When the leaders wanted to stone the woman caught in adultery (If she was caught in the act, I still wonder why they didn't bring the man, too.), what did Jesus say after the crowd went away? "Has no one condemned you? Then neither do I. Go and sin no more" (Jn 8:10-11) He didn't focus on her sin, but he acknowledged it. When the Samaritan woman at the well said that she had no husband, he told her that he knew that already and that she'd actually had five. But this was after he'd offered her living water. And she testified. (Jn 4:13-26) Jesus honored Zacchaeus by going to his home, and Zacchaeus acknowledged his dishonesty with a promise. (Lk 19:3-13)

When those who knew me when asked why I wanted to be a pastor – even now when I'm asked – my reply is simple. I didn't pursue ordination because I want to be a pastor. But Jesus said that those who have been forgiven much love much and those who've not been forgiven love little. I've been forgiven much and am very grateful and I show that by striving to live a life worthy of that love. We're not all called to be pastors, but we are all called to testify by acknowledging the sin that Jesus takes away so that our lives might draw others to that same hope. AMEN.