

Witnesses of These Things

A little over five years ago, as I entered into conversations with the Pastoral Search Committee at this church, I was pleased to see in the congregation's vision statement the forecast that "Our congregation is actively engaged in ecumenical activities within the South Snohomish County religious community and also provides leadership and full participation in denominational activities." And when I signed the Ministerial Agreement to become your pastor just a few short months later, I was also glad to see that my duties were to include "maintain(ing) a cooperative relationship with the Evergreen Baptist Association, the American Baptist Churches, U.S.A., and local ecumenical organizations." I was and still am committed to working within and promoting our denominational structure, perhaps because I've seen firsthand what can happen to a denomination when people stop paying attention to who's running it and for what purposes. And I have felt the callings of the ecumenical imperative since I was a teenager; first, wondering why Christians of various stripes weren't in more communication, then reaching out more and more often to those of different traditions and denominations for relationship, learning and working together for the Beloved Community. I even went and got married to a Catholic girl, although ecumenism was by no means the primary motivation.

All that to say that I'm tremendously glad to be a part of a congregation that encourages me to work with the South Snohomish County Ministerial Association and the Church Council of Greater Seattle and other, less formal groupings. I'm glad that we can celebrate the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and World Communion Sunday together in this place and that such observances seem natural and organic to the life of Good Shepherd Baptist and not like something awkwardly tacked on. Today is the Sunday of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and I want to spend just a few moments considering the genesis of that ecumenical tradition before turning to our Scripture for the morning.

Many of those who think about such things date the beginning of the modern ecumenical movement to a World Missions Conference one hundred years ago in Edinburgh, Scotland. It was a gathering of missionaries from many denominations who were working in areas which had not yet been touched by the Good News – mission societies working in long-established mission fields in Latin America and the Middle East were not invited. The aim of the participants was simple – no decisions were to be made, they simply hoped "to forge a common spirit and coordinate their work." Their concerns were practical. First and foremost, they wished to avoid competition for resources in serving the spiritual and physical needs of those to whom they were called. Better, they thought, to cooperate in seeking funding and putting it to use in the wide stretches of the world where Christ was being newly preached. There was also growing awareness among these European missionaries that while the multiplicity of denominations and their incessant squabbling was something to which they were long-accustomed, this disunity seemed scandalous to peoples being given their first lessons in the love of Christ.

In honor of this group of ecumenical pioneers, the promoters of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity - The Faith and Order Commission and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity - invited the Scottish churches to prepare the theme and materials for the 2010 Week of Prayer. The Scottish churches suggested as the theme "You are witnesses of these things." At first blush, it seems an odd choice. There is no overt statement of Church unity in these few verses. It does, however, reflect the history of the 1910 conference, when the imperative of mission gave rise to the spirit of ecumenical cooperation. And, as I hope to show in the rest of

Witnesses of These Things

the time I have this morning, a careful reading of this passage, with reference to the whole of chapter 24, opens up for us a number of different characteristics and experiences that all Christians share in common. The Spirit of Christ, in other words, binds us together into one Body whether we are committed to developing an ecumenical outlook or not.

I'm including all of chapter 24 in the scope of my remarks this morning for a couple of reasons. First, had I been a little more on the ball about promoting the Week of Prayer, I'd have let you all know that the whole chapter was suggested as devotional material during the week. So, in widening my focus at least briefly this morning, I'm able to suggest to you some ideas that other Christians around the world and in a variety of denominations have been considering for the past week. Secondly, I feel comfortable in doing this because the stories in Luke 24 are so well known. We have Luke's telling of the Resurrection, the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus (shouldn't that have been a Bing Crosby / Bob Hope movie, by the way?), Jesus' appearance to the disciples and, finally, his ascension. Throughout the chapter there are moments when we can identify with the disciples, when Christian Unity is achieved not by negotiation or practice but by the simple understanding of shared experience.

Consider the experience of the women and of Peter at the empty tomb. Luke tells us that a small group of women who had followed Jesus – Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and unnamed others – had followed Joseph of Arimathea to the tomb where Jesus was laid and had gathered spices to anoint Jesus' body following the Sabbath. "On the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest." They were perplexed. It seems to me that this is a reaction common to all Christians at some point. At some point in our lives, we hear as if for the first time the story of how Jesus went about doing good but was killed by the authorities but God raised him from the dead and our reaction, unspoken perhaps, is "What? What do you mean? That doesn't make sense!" In our transition from simple acceptance to considered faith, we must all be perplexed by this strange and wonderful story and we must puzzle over what it means for our conception of the world and how it affects how we live our lives. Peter, too, when he came to the empty tomb, was "amazed," Luke tells us. It's a strange story and it doesn't get any less strange with the passing of millennia. If we're not perplexed or amazed, perhaps we haven't thought about it enough.

Like those women and like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, we need sometimes to be reminded of the things that Jesus said. The men in dazzling clothes, presumably angels, remind the women of what Jesus had predicted for himself, which they have seen come true. Later that day and some distance away, Jesus himself comes to a pair of his disciples, though they do not recognize him, and leads them through the now-fulfilled prophecies of Moses and all the prophets about the Messiah, reminding them that they've known what was to happen to Jesus all along. We, too, need to be reminded of the promises of God when we are afraid, or tired, or

Witnesses of These Things

grieving, or simply distracted. We need to have them sung over again to us, those wonderful words of life. We need to be told the stories of Jesus, the ones we long to hear. We need to read them ourselves and savor the words and let the lessons sink into our hearts. As a preacher, I'm so glad I have the mandate to spend several hours every week in studying the Scriptures in order to write for you – hours that I get to spend in the company of Jesus or Paul or Moses or a prophet or some other man or woman of God. I'm glad for the wealth of teaching talent in this congregation that allows me to sit and learn on most Sunday morning's during the Sunday School hour rather than always being needed to teach myself. I'm glad for weeks like this past week when I was able to hear no less than four fine sermons and an inspirational address during celebrations of Martin Luther King Day and the Week of Prayer and at our own worship service with Rev. Loren Simmonds as our guest. We need to be reminded of the words of and about Jesus by those who can make them come alive for us all over again, just like those women, just like the disciples on the road.

And just like those disciples, something hard to describe happens to us when we come in contact with the Living Lord. When we have an encounter with the Spirit of Jesus, the Holy Spirit that still blows through our world today, we might say, as did those disciples in Emmaus, that our hearts were burning within us. We might, like the disciples in the upper room suddenly confronted by the Risen One, be initially terrified, not quite understanding what is happening. "In their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering," Luke tells us. Isn't it still true for us that when we are grasped by God's grace that we are often disbelieving and still wondering in the midst of our joy? Are we not bound together in our amazement that God should love even us? I was reminded this week of the old story about the great reformer, Martin Luther, and how he related to his students a dream that he'd had about heaven. "What surprised you the most?" asked one student. "That I was there," Luther replied.

In the stories of Jesus and his disciples, we begin to see how the Church cannot help but be one, for we are united in our experiences of the Good News of God's love, even if our understanding and expression of those experiences is varied. And while we are called to be one in Christ, nevertheless, I am quite certain that our diversity of understanding and expression, as long as it is held in love, is equally pleasing to God. Surely, the spectacular diversity of our minds and our bodies gives glory to God, telling of the grandeur of the Creator as surely as the beauty of the heavens, the spectacle of the countless fish in the sea, the radiance of the butterfly's wing, or the subtle beauty of the mists on the evergreen trees of our home in this place.

And so we are able to hear with Mary of Magdala and Simon Peter and all the rest the words of Jesus as he speaks them to us: "You are witnesses of these things." We may not be eye-witnesses like Mary or Cephas but we can surely give witness to the truth of the Christ-event in our lives, the Christ who came and who comes, Jesus who reaches across the centuries and the miles to touch us with his forgiving, loving presence when our spirits cry out for the God who seems absent to us because we have turned our backs on our Creator. We are witnesses of the Resurrection Power of God as our spirits, touched by death, are raised to new life even as Jesus' body was raised. Paul was not an eye-witness, nor Luke, nor John Mark but they gave witness to the truth of Jesus and so are we called to do.

Witnesses of These Things

And, just as in Luke's telling of this story the words of Jesus are not delivered to an elite few but to an unnamed and uncounted group, so we are called to be witnesses not because of a special set of skills or because we were born in a certain place or time or because we've grown up in or chosen a certain denominational heritage but simply because we have experienced the love of God in our lives. Peter, who was an eye-witness, writes about this in his first letter to the churches: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." Not only are we, individually, called to be witnesses to these things but all of those around the world of all Christian traditions are so called.

We are called to be witnesses. To be a witness, as Bishop Greg Rickel pointed out at St. Mark's Cathedral on Tuesday evening, it is not enough to see or to experience an event. It is not enough for us to be changed internally by the Christ event. To be a witness, one must testify to the truth one has learned. In the Black church, the tradition is for the preacher, upon expounding the truth to call out to the congregation, "Can I get a witness?" and for the congregation to respond in affirmation of the spoken truth. Can I get a witness? All of us are called to testify in our own way to the truth of Christ we have witnessed. As we have so often shared in this place, preaching the Gospel need only be done with words when necessary but the Gospel *must* be preached — at all times and in all places by our actions as well as by our words.

St. Francis said, "Preach the gospel at all times." Jesus said, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem." We may start with our witnessing at home, testifying with our words and our lives to those who look like us and think like us and speak like us but our call is to move out to those who are completely different. We are called to be in loving, open relationship with people who are our polar opposites so that they can see in our lives the truth of our witness, a reflection of the grace of God and the love of Jesus. If we of the Church are unified by our experience of Christ and by our calling to be his witnesses, we are also united by the difficult mandate to be ready to share the Good News to people who intimidate us or who disgust us or who annoy us, people who are so different from us that we scarcely know how to speak to them.

If this sounds too hard to bear, remember the last verse of our focus passage this morning. Jesus said, "And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." In her commentary on this passage, Dr. Diane Chen of Palmer Theological Seminary points out that this passage in Luke actually serves "as a pivot in the middle of the broader narrative of Luke-Acts." Before his death and resurrection, Jesus has sent out the disciples to preach but only within the territory of Galilee and Judea. They are equipped only to speak to their own nation. But from the point of this pivot forward, they are called to go to all nations. As Dr. Chen writes, "Given the dominant place of the Holy Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles, the second volume (of Luke's narrative) may well be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit." Now the disciples are empowered to go beyond their comfort zones, beyond their heritage and their careful observance of ritual purity, beyond their prejudices and distaste for Gentiles. We must remember that the Holy Spirit, poured out on all believers at Pentecost, continues to inform and empower us. We, too, are both called and equipped to move outside our

Witnesses of These Things

comfort zones in order to do our part in gathering the Beloved Community. Dr. Chen writes, “Being Jesus’ witnesses from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth is therefore a privilege and an obligation for every Christian then and now... All Christians are, first and foremost, forgiven, saved, and charged to spread God’s good news of salvation, in action and in proclamation, to the world by the power of the Holy Spirit. Left to our own devices, Christian unity may appear an unattainable goal. But by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are encouraged to pray to the one true God for whom nothing is impossible, that God may grant us the grace to present a powerful and united witness for the furtherance of God’s kingdom.”

We are a motley lot, we Christians. We come in all sorts of colors and shades, sizes and shapes, politics and theologies and praxis and beliefs. When we come together, we are like a rainbow or, perhaps with the 100th anniversary of the Edinburgh Conference in mind, a tartan. Like a tartan, we have our own colors to bring to the pattern, which makes the pattern more beautiful than a piece of plain colored cloth. Like a tartan, we are one piece of cloth, despite the different colors. We are one Body with one spirit, proclaiming one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all. And we have one calling, all of us, whether we be Baptist or Catholic or Lutheran or Pentecostal, whether we be Swedes or Norwegians, red, brown, yellow, black or white. We are witnesses of these things – the teachings and life and death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth and we are called to go and proclaim his life-changing Good News and the sweet forgiveness and grace of God. We are called to go and to show the nations how life with Jesus can be different than life without him. We are called to go and to love in Jesus’ name and for his sake. Amen.