

“Witnesses”

Acts 1:6-14

From the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL

May 21, 2023

Matt Matthews

Here’s a great line in Acts. The disciples ask Jesus, after his resurrection, *Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom of Israel?* If it is, they stand a lot to gain. They are likely to get the best seats in the house. They’ll be able to prop up their feet and watch what the Lord will do.

Jesus dashes their hopes. “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.”

In other words, the question you ask is God’s business, not yours. God isn’t inviting you into the wheel house to help with the decision making. You don’t get to steer the boat. You don’t get to see the master plan, and you don’t get to schedule what God is or is not going to do. Jesus puts them in their place. This is God’s work, not yours.

But here’s what you do get, Jesus says. You get to be my witnesses. You’re being called into the game. You’re getting an assignment: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses . . . “

What does that mean to you? *Being a witness?* That Greek word is related to the word “martyr.” I don’t love that connection, if I am, indeed, one who is called to be a witness. I’d rather take a seat and watch God do all the heavy lifting. But that’s not what Jesus wants for me, for you. He wants us to be witnesses. *To tell, to testify* about Jesus.

We are given an assignment here in Acts, and it’s not the first time; we should expect it. Every time Jesus shows up, he wants us to follow. He wants us to love like he loves. He wants us to be generous like the prodigal father, to be persistent like the lady who lost that coin, he wants us to go the extra mile like that Samaritan. He wants us to forgive, and not just once, but seven-times seventy. To visit the prisoner. To offer a cup of water. To speak up. To listen. To pray. To give. To heal.

And now, here in Acts: We are to be witnesses.

One way to be witnesses is to tell. To preach. To sing our faith. To talk about it.

Yes, this is a good way to be witnesses in many cases. I spend quite a lot of time and energy talking about the faith, expressing it, preaching it, writing about it. But I’m mindful that living the Jesus Way is perhaps more of what Jesus had in mind. Living the Gospel of Jesus probably says more about Jesus than our words (our doctrine, our beliefs) ever could. Being a living example certainly makes a longer-lasting impression than our words. I’m thinking here of Francis of Assisi and the words often ascribed to him: *Preach often. If necessary, use words.*

Be my witnesses, Jesus commands. The Holy Spirit will help. But you’ve got work to do. Get started. *Be my witnesses.*

* * *

After the Session meeting last Thursday evening, John Muirhead and I were in the parking lot having the proverbial parking lot meeting. We noticed a boy come to the church doors. It was dark by then. He looked in. He knocked. He rang the bell.

I approached him and said nobody was there. Could I help him?

He said he had gotten dropped off at Franklin Middle School after a field trip, but his ride home wasn't there. So, he was left behind.

Where did he seek help? To whom did he come?

He came to DREAAM House. He came to a familiar place into which he was a member of the family. He came to Mister Tracy for help.

What he got instead of Tracy Dace, were his mortal stand-ins. He got John Muirhead and me. We called Tracy. Tracy called his mom. And we gave this boy a ride home.

Be my witness, Jesus said. Be a church where all people are welcome. Be a church where those who don't have a ride can come for respite. Remember how Jesus wept over Jerusalem on Palm Sunday? (Matthew 23:37). How he wished he could gather his people like a mother hen gathers her chicks? Be such a mother hen in this world. Gather the strays, gather the lost, welcome the people who don't have a ride, who don't have a prayer, who can't have a drink, who can't get a break, who have fallen between the cracks. Be a sanctuary.

Be the home the world needs.

Be a welcome to people who only find doors shut in their faces.

Be my witnesses, Jesus says.

* * *

What does it mean for you to be a witness?

I was reminded this week that when people stand up against hate, the voices of hate often are rendered mute. They shut up. Those who thrive in the dark, slink away when somebody brings a light.

Bring a light. Be my witness.

Stand up to those who crack the racist jokes. Speak up when people are trading in lies or half-truths. Don't let people get away with saying things that don't ring true. Use your voice. Be my witness.

* * *

Systems Theory posits that every system has about the same amount of dis-ease and sickness as every other system. Every school system, every church, every town, every neighborhood association, every family has about the same amount of disfunction.

What makes a "healthy system" is not the amount of health or dis-ease there is in it. What makes a "healthy system" is where the leaders of that system shine the spotlight. If we spotlight the gossip, the worry, and the woe, that's all we see. If we spotlight those making a positive difference and those ministries that bring healing, that's what we see.

Shine the light on where God's grace is at work.

Water the weeds, the weeds will grow. Water the flowers, they will grow, and not only will the bees be delighted, but so will the hosts of heaven.

Be my witnesses.

Build something up.

Stop pick-pick-picking things apart.

Quite feeding your apathy and your fear. Stop tearing yourself down.

Insofar as you can, step out of cycles of despair.

Be part of the solution, not the problem.

Be my witnesses.

Paul tells the church in Philippi: whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about **these things**.

Paul might be suggesting attitude adjustment to our hyper anxiety. At least, he talking about what brings wholeness to a world that is broken. It's his way, I think, of exhorting the church to bear witness to the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

We don't ignore the pain, but we focus not on the pain but on the healers easing the pain and, thereby, transforming the world. Shine the light on the helpers, the healers, the hopeful.

Be my witnesses.

Bring yourself to this moment, to this holy calling. Bring whatever gifts you have. You are enough. God's Spirit is working. God's Spirit is working on and in you. Yes, you. Be brave. You're not too old. You're not too young. You bring exactly what is needed to this moment. Because of God's grace, you can do your part. You've got this. Shine the light on the good you see in this world—and join ranks with the good efforts aimed at eradicating the bad.

And if somebody shines the light on you, then smile. Stand tall. Throw your your shoulders. Without bragging, show them how you are trying to live the Gospel. You are the only "Jesus" many people will ever see. Don't hide if somebody shines the light on you. If necessary, use words. If you're really brave, step up to the mic and dare to sing. And if you're a little crazy and want to be a fool for Christ, try to dance.

Be my witnesses.

Jesus has come to the world to redeem it with love and hope and power and grace.

The first disciples, seemed eager to take a seat and watch what God was going to next. Jesus put the onus on this. The Holy Spirit will help you.

The next move is yours.

AMEN.