

“Who Will Give Witness to Our Faith?”
Acts 4:5-12; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18
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When we left the man lame from birth last week, he was jumping up and down, praising God and telling others about the people who helped him – Peter, John and Jesus Christ of Nazareth. If you weren't here, you missed him. If you were at the church retreat, you have a valid excuse. If you were not, you will have to explain yourself.

Anyway, we left him rejoicing, but also a bit worried that perhaps he might have made too much of a fuss and gotten his healers into trouble with the temple authorities. As we pick up the story this week, we discover that his concern was well-founded. Peter and John have been confronted by the priests, the captain of the temple and the Sadducees, and then they have been arrested and taken into custody.

To be fair, the primary concern is with Peter's preaching, all this talk about Jesus, his death and resurrection, and the claim that salvation comes through him. It doesn't help that Peter keeps emphasizing the Jewish leaders' role in rejecting Jesus. This is a bit insensitive on his part, though they wouldn't like what he is saying anyway.

But the healing of the man lame from birth is a problem too because it attracts so much attention, they do it at the gate of the temple and they do it without any credentials. Jesus himself was an itinerant rabbi who had no formal instruction. His followers have even less impressive credentials. They have no seminary degree or ordination certificate. What gives them the right to start teaching, preaching and healing? So, they are arrested and thus spend a night in custody.

As we join the story, it is the next day and they appear before an assembly of rulers, elders and scribes in Jerusalem. Annas, the high priest, is there, along with Caiaphas. We remember these guys from Jesus' last days. Also, there is a man named John and another named Alexander, along with others from the high-priestly family. In other words, all of the important people are there, all of the powerful people.

They ask Peter and John by what authority they have taught, preached and healed, and Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, delivers a powerful word of testimony about Jesus, who he is and how salvation is experienced through him, and in the end, they are spared, at least for the time being. They are released from custody, though they are warned not to teach in Jesus' name, a warning they pay no attention to whatsoever.

But they are not spared because of Peter's testimony. In fact, his words probably inflame the authorities even more because they repeat the criticism of these leaders' role in Jesus' death. The leaders are impressed with Peter and John's boldness as well as their eloquence for uneducated and ordinary men, but this is not what saves their skin.

What saves them is the fact that the man who has been healed is standing there with them, visible evidence of their ministry and testimony to whatever power is working through them - they say it is Jesus! This is a man everyone has known. He is over forty years old, the text goes on to say. Even the leaders acknowledge that a notable sign has been done through Peter and John. This cannot be denied. So, flesh-and-blood evidence of their ministry having transformed this man saves them for now from extended incarceration and perhaps even death.

The message for us is that if we are going to do something a bit edgy, radical even, we might want to have a healed person standing beside us, that is, some flesh-and-blood evidence that what we have been about actually transforms lives, some sign that we are living in such a way that makes a difference for others. It's difficult to argue with that.

I think about a colleague in Richmond who started a church in a housing project. People said he was out of his mind. It was a poor community, troubled by violence; no one cared about the community, not even the people living in it. But there were seven hundred children in that little housing project, Joe saw the needs and addressed them in incredible ways, and now, some twenty-five years later, there are thousands of people who can give witness to Joe's faith because their lives have been transformed, healed in many different ways.

I think of a colleague in Winston-Salem who started a jail and prison ministry over thirty years ago. Many thought he was crazy.

Those people don't change and they're not even worth the effort! They chose their own path! But Rodney remembered the words of Jesus in Matthew 25, words about visiting him when he was in prison, and he had his own legal difficulty as a young man. So, he knew better than the common wisdom, and now, over thirty years later, there are hundreds if not thousands who can give witness to Rodney's faith because their lives have been transformed, healed in many different ways.

I think of colleagues who have worked with immigrants and refugees even more than we do here, a colleague who ministered within a LGBT community in Chicago, even a colleague who ministers among the most outrageous group of people of all, runners in the Durham area, runners who meet at a pub... All minister in edgy ways, all work with people good sensible churches avoid, that is, people who need the church the most, the kind of people Jesus spent most of his time reaching out to; and while they receive criticism, all are surrounded by people who can give witness to their faith because their lives have been transformed, healed in many different ways.

If we're going to do something edgy, we are wise to have a healed person standing beside us; scores of healed persons are even better!

But the truth is this is a wise way to proceed not just if we are doing something radical and thus might need some kind of defense; it is a wise way to proceed if we are serious about Christian faith.

Our reading from 1 John says that we know love by this, that Jesus laid down his life for us. It is a claim that goes back to Jesus himself who says in John 10 that he is the good shepherd who lays down life for the sheep. But 1 John goes on to say that we ought to lay down our lives for one another. Then, the author adds this. "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need yet refuses to help (3:17)?" Indeed!

1 John is clear to say that both belief and practice matter. God's commandment, according to this author, is that we should believe in the name of God's Son Jesus Christ *and* love one another, as Jesus has commanded us (3:23). But love for one another is a non-negotiable part of faith, love expressed in tangible ways - meeting needs, pouring out

our hearts, laying down our lives. When we do this, there are people who are affected by our love, people who can give witness to our faith, people who can provide evidence of our willingness to lay down life.

So, the question for each of us is – who are these people? Who can give witness to our love? Is there anyone who can stand beside us to confirm the authenticity of our faith?

I know two people in this room who can answer these questions pretty quickly and decisively. For roughly thirty years Bill Kibler and Janice Osborne directed the clothing ministry of this church, a ministry which clothes hundreds each week, roughly 14,000 last year. Allowing for some growth in the ministry since Sonia Moore and others got it started, and some variance from year to year, imagine this number multiplied by thirty, and imagine all of these people right here.

Obviously, they wouldn't fit in this sanctuary; they might not even fit in the Capitol Square; and I am not using ministerial math, or a politician's math; I am using basic standard math. It is a massive crowd of people we are talking about whose lives have been transformed by this ministry - by having a basic need met, but also by having kindness offered and hope rekindled.

This work has taken the best efforts of scores of volunteers and it has benefitted from generous contributions from all over the community, but for thirty years two people poured their hearts into, lost sleep over it, badgered their pastors to make more announcements about it, all because they cared deeply about the ministry and the people it serves.

I know both Bill and Janice can and do talk openly about Jesus. He is why they have served. It is his love they are sharing with others in tangible ways. But they haven't just held strong beliefs and talked about them. They have embodied them, put them into action. They have been about the work of healing in Jesus' name, laying down life, loving their brothers and sisters. Because they have, there are plenty of people to stand by their side and give witness to their faith.

Janice's daughter Cindy shared the following story with her mother one Christmas because she thought it described her, which it does, but the essence of the story points to Bill as well and to all who

seek to be God's hands and feet in the world, all who are willing to lay down their lives for others.

As the story goes, one cold, blustery winter day, a little boy, about 10-years-old, was standing in front of a shoe store, barefooted, peering through the window, shivering with cold. His clothes were tattered and his face was dirty. People passed by on their way to finish their Christmas shopping, hardly noticing the frail boy.

But one lady stopped. She approached the young boy and said, "My, but you're in such deep thought staring in that window!" "I was asking God to give me a pair of shoes," the boy replied.

The lady took him by the hand, went into the store, and asked the clerk to get several pairs of socks for the boy. She then asked if they could use the store's restroom. She took the child to the restroom, removed her gloves, put him on the counter, knelt down and washed his little feet, and then dried them.

The clerk knocked on the door, saying he had the socks. The lady took them and placed a pair on the boy's feet. Then, she took him into the store and bought him a pair of shoes. She put the other socks in a bag and gave them to him. She patted him on the head and said, "No doubt, you will be more comfortable and a little warmer now."

As she turned to go, the astonished kid caught her by the hand, and looking up into her face, with tears in his eyes, asked her, "I was asking God for a pair of shoes. Are you God's wife?"

Well, Janice may not be God's wife literally. You're not that old, are you? But she is God's hands and feet, as is Bill, as are we all, and when we fulfill our purpose for being, when we lay down our lives for others in love, there are people standing beside us, like those who have benefitted from the clothing ministry, like the man Peter and John healed, people who can give witness to our faith.