

“Getting out of Our Comfort Zone”

Acts 1:1–11

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Unlike most of you, I was prepared for that wonderfully different anthem, but it still nearly lifted me out of my seat, which isn't that comfortable anyway... It was inspiring, but it also stretched our comfort zone in this church with all this energy, emotion, clapping, and tambourine. Shout hallelujah, indeed!

But sometimes we have to get out of our comfort zone to expand our experience. If the definition of insanity is doing the same thing the same way and expecting a different result, one corollary is that we cannot experience something more without doing something different, we cannot grow unless we change. When it comes to worship forms, we want our changes to be well-chosen, but sometimes we have to push through a little resistance to experience something new.

I say all of this partly to affirm new things in worship that I think we are appreciating, but mostly to create a little space for us to think a bit more deeply about a central teaching of our faith that is found in today's Ascension Day texts, but which does not fit into our comfort zone. I am talking about the “w” word.

In the reading from Luke 24, just before he is carried up into heaven, Jesus tells his first disciples that they are *witnesses* of his death and resurrection and all that they mean. In Acts 1, Jesus tells his first followers they are his *witnesses* in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. They have wanted to know if Jesus will now restore the kingdom to Israel. He will not. He will ascend to be with God, and they will gaze up into the heavens, wondering what they are supposed to do now. But two angelic figures will suddenly show up to tell them not to spend their time this way. Jesus has told them what to do – be his *witnesses* where they live and in all the world.

“Witness” is the word, we know it is a biblical one, and we realize every preacher has to preach about it. So, we are willing to tolerate the

message, perhaps even agree in principle that this is part of our calling. But most of us in churches like ours, not all but most, aren't going to do it, at least not what we think it means, because it's not in our comfort zone. We do other things better here, like nurture people in faith and serve the poor, and there are churches that do this better, though not in ways we like. So, we will listen respectfully, but we won't do it.

I want to plead with you to put a hold on any resistance you might feel for just a few minutes, to consider getting out of this comfort zone, because not only is being a witness to Jesus part of our calling, it's not exactly what many think, and it is critical that we provide our witness in the world in which we live today.

We think of witnessing as being synonymous with evangelism, and we think of it in very specific terms. It's about sharing someone's scripted reduction of Christian faith, usually with complete strangers, in an effort to get them to sign on the dotted line to a set of propositions.

We don't buy in to any of this. Christian faith is about more than ideas and beliefs and it is best shared in the context of caring relationships. So, we resonate with these words from Rebecca Manley Pippert's book *Out of the Saltshaker and into the World: Evangelism as a Way of life* (p. 16). "There was a part of me that secretly felt evangelism was something you shouldn't do to your dog, much less your friend." If evangelism is what we often think it is, we want no part of it!

But is this what Jesus means when he asks us to be his witnesses? "Witness" is a legal term, and we can only give witness to what we have personally seen or heard. So, parroting someone else's story or some reduction of it is inauthentic. We can only give witness to our experience, tell our story without embellishment, and allow others to make of it what they will; trust God to use that story, rather than presuming that we have to force a faith decision on someone.

This is what people do in scripture. Consider the man born blind whom Jesus heals. When he is questioned about who Jesus is, he doesn't talk about what someone else has experienced nor does he recite the four spiritual laws. He says, "I don't know about all that. All I know is that I was blind and now I can see!" Consider the woman Jesus meets

at a well. She simply tells others about her exchange with Jesus, what he has said to her, what he has known about her, and then she invites them to come and see for themselves. Over and over again, people in scripture give witness to Jesus by telling others what he has done for them. Surely that is more approachable for us, if not within our comfort zone, something we can stretch for with integrity.

And here's why we need to stretch – because there is so much witness that turns people off. Think about other aspects of life, dimensions of our current cultural mess. Most recognize the dangers of hostile division, moral hypocrisy, truth denial, anti-education sentiment, the actual closing of the American mind, to steal a phrase from Allan Bloom's book. But what do we do about all this?

Do we ignore it and hope it goes away? It may not; it probably will not. Do we immerse ourselves in criticism of all that is wrong? There is a place for that, but it is a bit like tar baby, and it rarely leads to something better. What is left is to pursue boldly something different and better; be about truth and healing, understanding and compassion, a better nation that lives up to the best of our heritage or at least our ideal.

The same principles apply to our calling to be Jesus' witnesses. There is no one way to do this, and thus we don't need to spend a lot of time criticizing others, but nor do we need to be silent. We need to offer our witness, in our way, among people we care about, when we sense they are open to hear.

Many church people are anxious about numbers these days, especially after covid. This is not the entire answer to our challenge, but it is part of it. We have to become less apologetic about our faith, less bashful in talking about our church, more like Rebecca Clayton. A beloved longtime member of this church, I think Rebecca invites just about everyone she meets to church. That is limited now, and the church does not equal Jesus, but it's not the worst place to start.

Evangelion, good news, is a biblical word. "Evangelism" is not nor does the baggage this word carries help us. When we embrace the biblical understanding of the word "witness," perhaps we can find a willingness to get out of our comfort zone — to fulfill our calling and provide a more inviting image of Jesus and what it means to follow him.

Yet to be a witness to Jesus involves more than a willingness to tell others about our experience with him; it includes our best effort at living in a way that is consistent with our claim of having been transformed by him. In his book *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living in a Three-Storied Universe* Walter Brueggemann says there are two reasons we have failed to convince our own children of the validity of the Gospel — we have become inarticulate about faith and we have failed to live in a way that convinces them that there is something different about us because of our relationship with Jesus. The former reality has led to many young adults not being in the church; the latter has run away more.

As Jessica Gross points out in her opinion piece for *The New York Times* — “Christianity’s Got a Branding Problem” — no matter what a given local church like ours does in the way of compassionate Christlike ministry, the national image of what it means to be Christian is connected to Evangelicals who have seemed to publicly embrace Neo-Nazis, White Supremacists, misogynists, jingoism, and downright meanness. As a result, young adults, and not only young adults, are leaving the Church in droves. We can talk about Jesus all we want, and we must, but if we don’t live like Jesus, our talk won’t have an impact.

But it is an uphill battle. None of us is perfect. We won’t always speak and act as we should. But even if we are as kind and forgiving as possible, even if we focus on the needs of others in a thoughtful way, it’s difficult to overcome the images that flood the airways and channels of social media of angry and judgmental people who say they speak and act as Christians. It’s difficult to compete for attention with groups like the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas, which is a tiny, family church but one that has received national press because of its hatred.

But there was one occasion in December 2010 when a local reporter came to do a story on that church’s protest at Elizabeth Edwards’ funeral and the reporter was diverted to our Toy Joy ministry that was taking place at the same time. She wrote a powerful story simply laying out the juxtaposition of hundreds of Baptists extending compassion to a thousand children with about ten Baptists spewing hatred. “What is the real story here?” the article asked in a subtle yet compelling way, “What does it mean to be Christian?”

We need more experiences like this. We need to live in a way that gives witness to who Jesus really is and thus what kind of life he inspires. But we also need ways of amplifying our witness.

One source of help is found in our reading from Acts 1, but it too pushes us to get out of our comfort zone. Before Jesus calls his disciples be his witnesses, he tells them they will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon them. He is talking about the great outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost recorded in Acts 2, a central event we will celebrate next Sunday. But the Spirit plays a key role throughout the book of Acts. The Spirit guides and empowers the early church to not only survive in a hostile world but thrive and grow in it.

For any challenge we face, including the challenge of offering a witness that can make a difference, it is critical that we not work alone. God's Spirit is here to guide and strengthen us. We just have to be willing to allow the Spirit to work in us, to speak with us, to transform the world through us. The challenge is Baptists like us aren't very comfortable talking about the Spirit. That's what Pentecostals do. The Spirit is dangerous. We might lose control. Well... how have we done with control? Have we ever really had control?

As with the word "witness," part of our resistance to the Spirit's role is a function of misunderstanding. The Spirit is not about valuing emotions over intellect; the Spirit engages both and more. The Spirit is simply God with us now and always, not in a way we can see with our eyes, but in a way we can sense in our inner being. Why would we not want God's help in all that we do? Why would we not open the door wide and bust completely out of this comfort zone, and in the words of the anthem "sing till the power of the Lord comes down!"?

We need as much human savvy as we can muster in this time, but we need not go it alone. The same Jesus who calls us to be his witnesses says we will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon us. That is enough to make the most reserved Baptist shout "Hallelujah!" And perhaps that is enough to nudge us ever so gently out of our comfort zone in talking more openly about our faith, that others might be given a chance to know the Christ we know, love, and serve.