

You Shall Be My Witnesses
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
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Acts 1:1-11

In this passage Jesus identifies one of the central tasks of the church. As we engage the world, Jesus tells us we are witnesses. “*You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria and even to the ends of the earth.*” I am a witness. You are a witness. We are witnesses. What exactly does that mean? What task is Jesus giving us? I would like to explore that question today through the *via negativa*. In order to help clarify what witness is, I want to say three things which witness is *not*.

First, witness was not the task the disciples expected. What task did the disciples expect? Verse 6 gives us a pretty clear picture. At the beginning of our passage, I have the impression that the disciples are feeling pretty good. I have to believe they are feeling sassy and powerful. Jesus has been raised from the dead. He’s shown that he is so powerful, not even death can stop him. “All authority on heaven and earth has been given to me!” He’s told the disciples that they will share his power. In Luke 24:49 the resurrected Jesus tells them “stay in the city and you will be clothed with power from on high!” I imagine the disciples feeling like a team that just won the championship. And in verse 6 they’re looking for their championship parade. “Lord at this time are you going to restore the Kingdom to Israel?” “Jesus we know we got it wrong before the crucifixion. We argued about who would be the greatest in the kingdom, we asked if we could sit on your right and your left when you came into your kingdom. We didn’t realize you had to die like that! We missed that and we’re sorry! But now that all that unpleasant suffering and dying is over, *now* can we kick out the Romans and rule!? Now we are finally going to get the perks of power, right?”

“No” says Jesus, “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, but the power will not be so that you can sit on thrones, instead, you will be my witnesses.” The disciples hope to wield power in the traditional way, but Jesus says ‘no, you will be witnesses to my power.’

This basic misunderstanding still plagues the church today. Many Christians still talk as though getting cultural power, social power, political power is the goal of the church. Christians should be trying to gain as much social influence as possible, then they can use that power to bring the kingdom. But in the book of Acts, when you hear Jesus in this passage, and when you watch the way the church interacts with the human institutions of power, it’s pretty clear that Jesus and the Holy Spirit are not trying to take over the cultural institutions of Rome and Jerusalem. They are not planning a strategic takeover of the Roman court system and the Roman legislature.

Does the early church engage the courts of power? Absolutely. We saw that in the last sermon in this series, the one I preached three weeks ago. Paul and Peter and John and Stephen are constantly standing before the political and cultural powers of their day. They confront Herod and the Sanhedrin and King Agrippa and the philosophers of the Areopagus. But they don’t do it as a takeover strategy. They are not revolutionaries trying to seize Herod’s throne or Agrippa’s throne. They’re not orchestrating a coup. They stand in those throne rooms and witness to Jesus’ throne room. Their power is the power of witness. “Jesus is the real Lord. God raised him from the dead and made him Lord and Christ. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

Jesus is Lord of this world. We all need to recognize him and serve him.” We are not first of all political-cultural activists, we are witnesses.

That doesn't mean that the New Testament is apolitical, or that the Bible has nothing to say about politics and government. It definitely does. Caesar claims to be Lord and Caesar wants to be worshipped. The disciples say Jesus is Lord and he alone must be worshipped. Those rival claims come into conflict. You see that in Acts 17. When Paul is in Thessalonica, he does what he usually does. He goes to the synagogue and he witnesses to King Jesus. He tells everyone that Jesus is the messiah. He tells everyone about the kingdom of God. It leads to a riot in the city. A whole group of people come together and this is their accusation: *“These men are turning the world upside down! They are defying Caesar's decrees and saying there is another king! One called Jesus!”* The rule of King Jesus is starting to shake the power of empire. So there are political implications here, but the power Paul brings to bear is not conventional political power and conventional political activism, it is the power of witness to God's justice and righteousness and rule.

That doesn't mean Christians shouldn't get involved in politics, or that we shouldn't seek to influence our culture. It's great when Christian people find places of influence in politics, or business, or law, or education, or science or any other conventionally powerful places. But in those places your greatest power is the power of your witness. In that place you witness to the rule of King Jesus. And by that I mean, not just sharing your personal testimony, I mean witnessing to the way King Jesus rules in the area of your authority and influence. If you are in law or politics, you witness to his justice and his laws and to the things he values. If you are in medicine, you witness to his compassion and his mercy and care. If you are in science, to the excellence of his creation and the wonder of his design. If you are in business, you witness to the fruitful abundance of God's world and the creative energy of work.

Of course having a place of social influence is better than being on the margins, but God's kingdom does not depend on you holding an influential position. If you lose your position of influence, your call isn't to get that influence back by any means necessary, your call is to stay faithful to your witness. In Acts, sometimes the disciples are standing in front of a huge crowd of adoring listeners, sometimes they're sitting alone in prison. In both places, their call is the same. Faithful witness. The task is not what the disciples expected. They will not sit on thrones of power in Jerusalem. They will be witnesses.

The second thing witness is not. Witness is not just directed toward unbelievers. The call to witness isn't just a call to do evangelism. It's bigger than that. Evangelism is really important, but it's only a subset of witness. It's a call for your life to magnify Jesus in your whole life, through all your words and deeds. In general, everywhere you go and in everything you do, your life should witness to the love of God through Jesus Christ your Lord. Of course, much of the witness in Acts is to people outside the community. The believers stand up and tell unbelievers and outsiders about Jesus. But they also proclaim the mighty acts of God to each other. They witness to other believers about the things God has done. Paul and Barnabas come back from their missionary journeys and they witness to the entire community. They tell everyone about what God is doing among the Gentiles and everyone rejoices. The whole community is lifted and strengthened by their witness.

Here's the thing: God is not always easy to see. People often struggle to see him working. That's just true. So when God does reveal himself to us, when God does move in our life, we can do so much good by simply sharing what God has done with others.

Here's an example from my own life. About 15 years ago, I was visiting a family of a dying man in hospice. The man was no longer communicative and he'd said his goodbyes and he was ready for God to take him. His family was also ready for God to take him. After my visit I joined hands with the family and I lead them in a prayer around his bedside. I prayed for comfort and then I prayed, "Lord please take Walter. He's ready. He doesn't want to suffer anymore. Please take him gently to yourself." And literally at the very moment I said those words, Walter died. He peacefully breathed his last, and Jesus took him. When that prayer was done, everyone in that room looked up with wide eyes, because for all of us it was like God had just shown his face in that room. It was like God had reached down into that room. The power of God was right there. That moment sustains me in my moments of tiredness and doubt. That moment sustains me when I worry about the future of the church and the future of our country. Why would I keep that to myself? That moment gives me strength and faith, when I share that with others, the same grace and power can strengthen them. This moment is like a piece of spiritual bread for me, why would I hoard that bread? I should share it with others. I shouldn't just blab it all over to whomever, whenever. It's a holy and intimate event. But at the right time, in the right place, I ought to be a witness.

We all have stories. They may not be dramatic like the one I just told. They can be simple and humble. "My prayer life is so important to me. Talking to Jesus every day and bringing my stuff before him gets me through my day." That's a really basic testimony. If you share that with a group of teens in a catechism class, or if you share that humbly and simply with a coworker at work who asks about your faith, you are sharing spiritual food. You are giving a piece of spiritual bread to another person. If you see something, say something. You are a witness.

Which brings me to the third and final thing that witness is not. Witnessing does not take special skill. Sometimes we feel as though, in order to witness, we need to be an expert. If I'm going to say something about Jesus, if I'm going to tell people about Jesus I have to have all the answers. "Because what if I tell my coworker about Jesus and he comes at me with hard questions? What if he says something like, 'How can you believe in a good God when the world is so full of evil!?' I have no good answer? I'm not qualified to witness! I will leave that for the articulate and the theologically educated."

A couple of things here. First of all, people don't always come back at you with questions like that. 99% of people will not come back at you with philosophical objections. And second, if they do, you don't have to have a sophisticated theological response. You just have to say, 'I don't have all the answers, but this is what I've seen, this is what I feel. This is the Jesus who saved me. Jesus doesn't say you will be my apologetics expert in Jerusalem, in Samaria and to the ends of the earth. He says you will be my witnesses. In a court of law, a witness doesn't have to argue the case. A witness just has to say what they saw. This is what I saw, this is what I felt, that man Jesus - he's the one who saved me.' That's all you have to do. It's not your job to prove the case, you don't have to make an eloquent closing argument, you just witness. In a court of law, whose job is it to prove the case? The lawyer. In the Bible, who's the lawyer? The Holy Spirit. He's called the counselor and advocate. John 16.7-8. It's the Spirit's job to use our witness to convict the hearts of others.

As I put this sermon together this week, I thought about the way the Spirit has used witness in my own life. The Holy Spirit has used so many different kinds of witness from so many kinds of people to form me. The witness of my parents, my mother telling me how at 13 years old while working a switchboard at the hospital in Brampton Ontario, the words of Billy Graham cut her to the heart. Some older kids in my youth group sharing with me how the Holy

Spirit had changed them after going to a Young People's event and then actually seeing their joy and seeing the real change in their life. The witness of the words of CS Lewis in the Narnia Chronicles and JRR Tolkien in The Lord of the Rings, helping to give me a Christian imagination. The witness of great saints of the past like Mother Theresa and Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King who stood up for justice and truth and faith in the face of great opposition. The witness of church school teachers who didn't set the world on fire with their classes, but whose stumbling, heartfelt prayers were a witness to how their life was open to the face of God. The witness of the lives of a hundred ordinary saints whose funerals I've conducted. Men and women – who kept their eyes on Jesus during hard times, who kept loving and hoping in the face of terrible loss. I have been surrounded by a great cloud of witness, and all of this witness is worked together by the Holy Spirit to show me the face of Jesus and the power of Jesus and the love of Jesus. Jesus Christ, my Lord and my God. Jesus Christ, the world's true King. Jesus Christ, who is the only refuge for all our hearts.

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