

The Testimony

Psalm 1
I John 5:9-13

In many denominations—and independent churches—anyone who wants to join must give a testimony. They must share their beliefs about Jesus, and those beliefs must conform to that particular church's teachings. One young woman made the decision to go through this process. I asked her how she prepared. “Oh they're all kind of the same,” she said. “If I fit the pattern I'll be fine.”

“Will you say what you actually believe,” I asked, “or will you have to kind of bend your faith around to fit the mold?”

“Honestly, a little of both,” she said.

The idea of giving a testimony that fits accepted teachings appears throughout the New Testament. Jesus sent his disciples out on a preaching and healing mission. When they returned he asked for a detailed report on what they had done and said. The Apostle Paul often wrote of his testimony. He claimed to have received what he taught directly from the Holy Spirit. Today in I John we read of the “testimony of God.” It is an extremely orthodox message. It “(bears) witness to his Son.” This likely refers to Jesus' baptism. In that moment, Matthew tells us, the Holy Spirit descended on

Jesus in the form of a dove. And the voice of God spoke, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." This provides us with yet more evidence that Jesus was no mere mortal, but God in the flesh, physically walking among people who would become witnesses in their own right.

John continues with, "Whoever believes in the Son of God has this testimony in themselves." Whoever *believes*. Whoever has accepted the spiritual gift of faith in Jesus *as the Son of God*, has truth written upon their hearts. They know it is real. Carl Jung was a groundbreaking psychiatrist. He developed "analytical psychology". Using a system of archetypes in order to critique Sigmund Freud's work, Jung originated the concepts of introversion and extroversion, and greatly improved the effectiveness of therapy. In 1959 a writer asked him whether he believed in God. He answered, "I do not need to believe, I *know*." This statement caused strong reactions from two directions. On the one hand, in mid-century Europe (Jung was Swiss), the two world wars and the Great Depression had caused a massive crisis of faith. Especially among the educated classes, faith in God had nearly disappeared. Carl Jung was a famous academic. When he claimed his faith it challenged the lack of belief many of his colleagues had.

On the other hand, a few well-known Christian leaders criticized Jung for seeming to place knowledge above faith. ("I do not need to believe, I *know*.") A fair, honest reading of what he meant precludes both critiques. He meant his faith was so solid he just *knew* there is a God, and that God came to this world in the form of Jesus

of Nazareth. By the time I attended seminary in the early '80s, the sacred academy had fully embraced Jung. My counseling professor, Sandra Brown, taught his work. She made it clear that she felt Carl Jung was the greatest theoretical psychiatrist ever to live. And, she added, he had demonstrated clinically that the power of the Holy Spirit to heal is absolute.

I honestly do not remember his name, but I will never forget a man I met when I sat in on his therapy sessions with Dr. Brown. I will call him Jeb. He was confused and angry and depressed. (A little known aside: depression often manifests itself as anger, more than sadness.) At one point, when Dr. Brown pressed pretty hard on one issue, he stood up and made a fist. She said, "There are two of us and one of you." He sat down and we continued. I made a mental note not to get on her bad side. Even after forty-plus years it would be unprofessional of me to share details of Jeb's issues. I recall some of them, but I should not repeat them. I can say this much. Dr. Brown elicited from him a testimony of his living faith in Jesus Christ and she used that as the most important tool in her kit. Again and again she reminded him that a power, a force, a *Spirit* existed and he could use it to heal. It took time, but he did. And I have seen it happen any number of times for others ever since.

When we believe in God we believe also in purpose. We believe that life has a reason. We believe God created us, Jesus saved us, and the Spirit moves us. John wrote, "I write this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so you may know you have eternal life." To believe that we must first believe that God loves us. And

that colors all of life. Jesus became human in order to die as we die. He did this out of obedience to God's plan and love for us. Yet as we say in one of our assurances of pardon, he also remained God that he might rise from the dead. When John tells us we have “this testimony” on our hearts, he means we believe all of the above. If we believe only parts of it, we lose the full force—for meaning, for healing, for hope—of the Holy Spirit. We live a diminished existence.

Al (his real name) was a Presbyterian minister. He spent his career in Oregon and California. He had grown up in a conservative church in Kansas. In order to join, it required the kind of testimony described at the start of this sermon. It prohibited dancing, drugs and alcohol and all kinds of behavior. Its women and girls were not allowed to wear trousers. The first member of his family to attend college, Al met Bernice, his future wife, on campus. She had grown up Presbyterian. They both laughed thirty-plus years later when they recalled how she had shown up for their first date wearing blue jeans. They fell in love and got married before their senior year. At her church. Al could not remember ever before having entered any church other than his own. He liked the organ music (his church permitted only instruments specifically mentioned in the Bible, like tambourines and trumpets). The pastor's wedding homily impressed him, too. They talked it over and he “converted” to Presbyterianism. Ultimately he graduated from one of our seminaries and had a long ministerial career.

At a Presbytery meeting another pastor asked him what kind of testimony he had made as a teenager in his former church. “Oh I would be embarrassed to say. I

don't really remember it but I am sure it was filled with things I no longer believe.” The other pastor followed up with, “What testimony would you make today?”

“Well, that's an easy answer,” he said, “ I believe in Jesus. I believe he loves me. And I believe he made me to do this.”

It may seem like an exaggeration, but overhearing that answer changed my life. Made by a man who so clearly meant every word he said, it reminded me that there can be only one foundation for a meaningful life. That foundation is not a swanky education. Nor is it “success” in the world's eyes. It is, rather, faith in God's love. Faith that God's plan continues to unfold. Faith that each one of us has a calling within that plan. We all struggle from time to time. Whether you teach for a living, or do accountancy, or dig ditches, or whatever, days come when you question your work and personal life decisions. I know a mom of several children (she does not attend this church) who wonders if she can continue another day, another week. She has told me that her most effective way to hold back the doubts is to remember the faith in Jesus she is trying to instill in her own children. She has said something like, “When I think about my own place in God's eyes, it gets so much better.”

Psalm 1 tells us that those who walk in the “way of the righteous” are blessed. And they *know it*. They *delight* in it. This state of being requires faith. And this way of living can become a form of testimony. It speaks to others of the very real power of God's Spirit. As St. Francis of Assisi purportedly said, “Preach the Gospel at all times.

Use words when necessary.” The testimony we make by our way of living in Christ has tremendous power. Yes, sometimes words *are* needed. But the Psalm tells us our actions must reflect our faith. Or as the Book of James puts it, “faith without works is dead.” When I see videos of certain preachers who push the idea that our chief purpose is to prosper, it revolts me. As our Presbyterian catechism states, “The chief purpose of humanity is to love God and enjoy God forever.”

Psalm 1 claims that if we walk in obedience to God's will we will prosper. But nowhere does it claim that prosperity is the goal. It is, rather, a side effect. And it refers more to a spiritual, and less to a tangible, prosperity. As Paul put it in his famous “love” chapter, I Corinthians 13: “So faith, hope and love abide; but the greatest of these is love.” Seek how you might act—and if necessary, speak—your testimony. As John reminds us, all who believe in Jesus receive purpose. We *know* he loves us and indeed, loves even those who do not call upon his name. Call upon his name. Show the world his power working through you. Maintain the fellowship of the church, so together we might multiply our testimony through works of mission and service. Continue caring for one another in the church. When do these things—and even more—in the name of Jesus we create a positive feedback loop. The church's ministry gains momentum. We see it in ourselves and those watching us do, too.

As we have recently said, we have articulated our mission—our testimony—in three words: Worship. Love. Serve. Let *fpus* keep on with this critical work.