

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Luke 24:36-49

Bearing Witness"

As we wind up our little theology series, and the part that deals with the work of the Holy Spirit, we come to a topic that gets many Christians nervous and even upset. In some denominations it's called the *E-Word* - E for *evangelism*. It's one thing to talk about Christians serving others, or promoting social justice, or even acquiring virtues, but the idea of evangelizing, or "proselytizing" as some call it, smacks of presumption, religious arrogance, a discredited claim "to know the truth." Evangelism is something only Evangelicals would want to do!

But at the same time, the decline in attendance in many churches has caught the attention of leaders, who begin to see that unless a church enthusiastically commends its faith and practice anew to each generation, decline and disappearance are the only likely outcomes. So there are now many attempts across a wide range of denominations and traditions to rediscover what form "evangelism" might take in a day when people are skittish about "preaching the gospel."

In the New Testament, evangelism is one of many activities that comes under the broader heading of *bearing witness to Jesus Christ*, and maybe that will make it easier for us to see what it can entail. Let us first stipulate that *bearing witness is a work of the Holy Spirit, within and among Christians, that points to Jesus*. It is evidence that God's people give

that supports the basic truth claim of Christianity - that *Jesus is alive and risen from the dead*. Christianity is not a movement of people who revere a 1st century Jewish teacher and want to be his disciples today. It is a community of people bound together by the conviction that *Jesus lives*, and that conviction changes their view of themselves and their world.

But how does the Spirit bear witness to the living Jesus? What is the evidence in Christians that points to Christ?

1) *Membership in Community*

The first, as we noted several weeks ago, is *membership in the Christian community* - that is, Christians are part of *the Church*, and ought to be part of a church.

Prime evidence that you are a Christian, that the Spirit is at work in you, is that you gather with other Christians to *worship*. Christians worship the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, his only Son, and the Holy Spirit. The rationale for worship is to tell God *how much he is worth* to us - that's the meaning of the word *worship*!

If we find worship "inconvenient," it says something about the worth of God in our lives. But being part of a worshipping community bears witness to the reality of God and the presence of Jesus Christ. Just the

fact of being a part of a church, the fact of going to worship, speaks volumes – to members of your family, to your neighbors, to your working colleagues. You know this, because you have seen their looks, heard their silent questions, or at one time yourself been part of their skepticism: “You go to church? An intelligent person like you?”

Bear your witness. Accept that at times it will be costly. Start going to church and some people may not speak to you again. But in your identifying yourself with the community of Jesus Christ that we call his church, you bear witness to him.

2) *Affirming the Truth*

The second way Christians bear witness to Jesus Christ is that they learn, accept, and build their world-view around the *truth that God has revealed*. When Jesus told his closest followers that he was calling them to carry on his mission in the world, he “opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures... that all that was written in the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms was fulfilled in him” (Lk 24).

The Holy Spirit is also called *the Spirit of Truth*, who brings to mind the things of Jesus, and teaches Christians what they need to know. So evidence of the Spirit’s work is found in the lives of people who *want to know the truth* of God. First and foremost that means the Bible. Being a person who reads their Bible regularly, or is part of a regular study group, bears witness to the fact that you take seriously the revelation of God, and know you need to learn more of it. If you are someone who never reads the Bible (even in church), or thinks it is outdated, unreliable and uninteresting, you proclaim that you do not believe it is truth from God. But if you know someone in your family or your workplace who is a regular and serious Bible

reader, you know they are bearing witness to the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

None of this denies that there is truth to be found beyond the Bible. Most of us spend most of our days pursuing it, working with it, trying to expand it. All truth is God’s truth, and all is worth knowing. But do not allow yourself, if you claim to be a Christian, the presumption of looking down on what claims to be God’s self-revelation. To do that bears witness only to intellectual arrogance.

Read your Bible, study your Bible, know your Bible, bear witness to Jesus Christ. Allow your view of your life, of God, of the workings of this world, to be shaped by the narrative of the only One who truly does see it all “from the top of the mountain.” Recognize how God has been at work since the beginning of the world drawing a people to himself, and how his work comes to a focus in Jesus, and how God’s mission to reconcile the world to himself is now the mission of his people – the Christians. Bear witness to the ministry of reconciliation that Jesus has given to his church.

3) *Demonstrating Christian Ethics*

Thirdly, evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit is to be found in the quality of life and the service of Christians. We bear witness to Jesus Christ when we develop the graces, the virtues, the character that God demands; the ones Jesus exemplifies, and which the Spirit can produce within and among us.

When Christians demonstrate Christian ethics, we draw attention to – bear witness to – the character of God, the person of Jesus, the power of the Spirit. How? By the priorities in our lives, by the way we spend our time and our money, by our ambitions for ourselves and our children, by our generosity to needy people and good causes, by our volunteer efforts in the community, in

the schools, in our neighborhood associations, in music, in sports, in our churches. We bear witness to Jesus Christ when we feed hungry people, tutor people who can't read, supply clothes and furniture to a family that has lost its home, visit lonely people in the hospital or in nursing homes or in prison.

We bear witness to Jesus Christ when we join others in pursuing social justice, welcoming and safe communities, ethical practice in business and government. We bear witness for Jesus Christ when our charitable giving reflects our inner convictions and not what we think we can afford. We bear witness to Jesus Christ when we take seriously his claim that because we are reconciled to God, reconciliation with other people is now a personal goal and a Christian societal goal, and that "repentance and forgiveness" indeed now need to be preached and practiced as the essential parts of any reconciliation. We bear witness to Jesus Christ when we strive to be reconcilers - to be peacemakers - to make our families, our churches, our communities, our school districts, our nation, places where people get along and do not divide and demonize or impugn the motives and character of other people.

We bear witness to Jesus Christ when we worship, when we believe and tell the truth, when we serve other people, when we are reconcilers, when we are gracious examples. We live as those who have a calling and wish to be found worthy of it. We do not imagine that we are so good that our lives "speak aloud of the presence of God," but we do desire by the Spirit's strength to do nothing that would shame the name of Christ, and to become clearer and better witnesses to his work in us.

And so at times we have to *resort to words* to bear witness to Jesus Christ, because we are

not able to live out the gospel well enough, and must at times speak "more than we can do." When the 1st century Apostles were told "not to speak in Jesus name," they responded that "*we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard*" (Ac 4:20). If our lives have been impacted by the grace of God, the love of Jesus Christ, the comfort of the Spirit, there are times when we can't help but speak about these things to other people, especially to people going through difficult times. So at times we are privileged "to comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God" (2 Cor 1).

St. Francis of Assisi is said to have encouraged his followers to "*preach the gospel at all times - if necessary, use words.*" He understood what bearing witness to Jesus Christ is like: a life that speaks of Christ's presence by its priorities, its dependence on God, its joy, its grasp of truth, its peace, its grace, its generosity, its desire to learn, its hope, its readiness to worship. You can call that evangelism, you can call it "witnessing," you can call it commending the gospel. It is living as a Christian by the grace of Jesus Christ, by the power of the Spirit, and as part of the community of the people of God.

God give you and me grace to bear our witness to Jesus Christ more plainly, more winsomely, more joyfully, so that other people may learn the reality of his presence within us and among us.

Let us pray.....