

The Congregational Church in South Glastonbury  
Sermon – May 8, 2005  
“We Are Witnesses”

John 17: 1-11, Acts 1: 6-14  
Easter 7/A, May 8, 2005  
Lynne M. Dolan

Jesus is gone. He is finally gone. This time we do not know when he will return. He has ascended into heaven. He's been swooped away, out of our sight. We can imagine the disciples looking skyward, motionless, dumbfounded, bewildered and a bit numb. They had been through this before. When they laid Jesus in the tomb, they thought that was the end. However, he returned, meeting them in strange places, continuing to teach them and care for them. But this time it appears as though he is gone for good.

Two men in white robes (usually a description for angels) come and ask why they are standing looking into heaven? They have no answer. What was the last thing Jesus said to them? “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” They can not do this without a little help. Therefore, Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit to help us all witness to the power of God at work in our lives. Then Jesus is gone. Like a flash, taken into heaven.

This is the day we celebrate the Jesus' Ascension into heaven. While we may not know what to make of the ascension, this mystical and mysterious exit scene, like those early disciples, we too are charged to be Jesus' witnesses. Now that Jesus is gone, we are responsible to live a life that emulates the life of Christ. We are to witness to his radical love, his ability to embrace and accept the most unlovable and ornery among us. We are to witness most especially to the suffering love of God. Being a Christian is more than believing in a set of doctrines. It is more than living a good moral life. It is more than working for justice and peace in the world. It is more than loving Jesus with all our heart. Is there a way to define the Christian life that pulls all these aspects together? Shirley Guthrie, Professor of Systematic Theology at Columbia Seminary, suggests there is. In his book, *Diversity in Faith-Unity in Christ*, he says that the Christian life can be defined fundamentally in terms of witnessing.

As a follower of Jesus, we witness to the suffering love of God. The preacher J. Harold McKeithen, Jr. believes “there is a radical conviction at the heart of Christianity. It is the conviction that God who is invincible is also vulnerable, that God who is all powerful makes God self weak, that God who strengthens and gives

life is the same God who suffers and dies. The God of the Bible is a God who is over us in majesty and a God who is with us in lowliness, and God's diversity is revealed both in God's glory and in God's humility and suffering."

Too often we pick and choose the kind of God we want to serve. We have no problem worshipping a powerful God, the God whom we think gives us authority over things or blesses our way of thinking. However, we sometimes have trouble with a suffering God. God chose to live among us, to take on flesh, to feel what we feel, to know what we know, to live as we live. We are not always comfortable with our own vulnerability. Therefore, a vulnerable God can challenge our way of thinking. It is easier to believe in a God who is beyond one's experience, than to remember that God chose to be one of us.

God is among us, among all creation, the weak and the strong, the rich and the poor, the well and the sick. God comes to dwell among us in all our creatureliness and sinfulness. It is to this incarnate God that we bear witness. Our life is made up of a myriad of experiences. It is easy to recall those moments of great joy, or even moments of simple joy. But there is for all of us what Karl Barth called "the dark side" of human existence, the side that includes disappointment, depression, disease, discomfort, the slippery slope of physical decline and inevitable death.

The good news is not that God protects us from these experiences, but God shares them and therefore can be a force of comfort and healing in the midst of them. In Jesus, God knows what it is like to be disappointed, to be frustrated and confused, to be let down by your friends, to feel defeated, to suffer and die. God knows what it is like to feel grief and loss. God is not absent, far away or indifferent to what we suffer or experience. We witness to this ever-present God, one who is loving and compassionate. We give thanks for this God who will never leave or forsake us.

God is with us when we do the right thing, when we surprise even ourselves with our courage and compassion. God is also with us when we are disappointingly human, when we are sinful. Sin is not something we are comfortable talking about. It is like the elephant in the room. None of us would likely deny that we in fact, sin. We can acknowledge that we act sinfully and seek God's forgiveness for such behavior. However, if I were to ask you to define "sin" I would likely receive many different answers. The preacher Harold McKeithen offers one way to look at sin. Perhaps it is his way, but it may inform us and the way we think of sin. He says, "Sin is our inability and unwillingness to relate to God and to other people with the same regard for their interests and feelings that we have for our own." His definition of sin makes a lot of sense to me.

If sin is, “our inability and unwillingness to relate to God and to other people with the same regard for their interests and feelings that we have for our own,” how easily I am a sinner. How or where have any of us been unwilling or unable to hold another person’s interests or feelings in the same regard as our own? I do not have to agree with you or be on the same side of every issue in order to respect you. However, as a disciple of Jesus, I am obliged to hold your ideas and feelings in the same regard with which I would expect you to hold mine. There are so many ways that we can act “sinfully.” We do so by speaking tactless words and then laughing to make them seem innocuous, by being blind to how our thoughtless words or deeds may hurt another person. Perhaps we speak when we should listen or keep silent when we should speak up. Perhaps it is in the way I say something that makes me feel better or more righteous when at the same time, it makes a brother or sister feel small or wounded.

Words are powerful. They take on a life of their own as soon as we release them into the universe. Perhaps this definition of sin can enlighten the way we speak to each other, how we express our sense of righteousness or disapproval or how we name our joys and concerns? Can we say what we want to say and still hold other people or groups in the same regard with which we would want to be held? Can we say what we want to say without inflicting pain and suffering on another person? Our rhetoric, spiritual and political has become so charged and so potentially destructive. This definition of sin helps me to think before I speak or act in a way that may be harmful or hurtful to someone else.

We expect that the church will be a safe place to share our joys and concerns, our sorrows and our delights, our worries and our triumphs. We expect this to be a place where we can be honest with each other, disagree sometimes, wrestle with issues of faith, seek God’s wisdom only to be transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit. We can do all these things and more when the Holy Spirit is alive within us. We know all too painfully and too well, however that a community of faith is not immune from sin. There are moments when we do not hold one another with the highest regard, when we say things that wound other people, when we regret doing something, saying something, or perhaps not doing something else. It is at these moments when I am most aware of God’s presence and most thankful for God’s forgiveness.

The psalmist reminds me that “God does not deal with us according to our sins.”(Psalm 103) It is not because I am particularly good, or righteous or better than anyone else that God loves me. God loves me even if and most especially when I am none of these things. God loves me, sinner that I am. Jesus stood with those whom others had forgotten and neglected. He was patient with his cowardly and confused disciples, loved the adulterous woman, honored the dishonest tax collector, and

blessed those who were struggling to be followers of the Way, as the early Christians were called with the courage they needed to continue.

We are no holier or better or more righteous than others, but we are forgiven. Will we sin again? Undoubtedly we will. Will we do or say something we regret? That is likely. Before we act or speak again, that voice we hear within us will keep us from sinning as easily as we might have before.

For many of us the word “evangelism” makes us uncomfortable. It means simply sharing the Good News. When you have experienced the love of Christ in a special way, you should share that. When you know have felt God with you in the worst of times as well as the best of times, you should share that. When you recognize you are a sinner that God has so graciously forgiven, you should share that too. This is what it means to be a witness. As Christ’s witnesses we stand in solidarity with the poor not to fix what is wrong, but to love one another as children of God. We befriend the sinner, not to condone or support their actions, but to affirm that as human beings we are all worthy of care. We do so with deep humility, knowing how easily we too can be the sinner.

The angels asked, “Why do you stand looking toward heaven?” You will not find Jesus there. You will find him instead, in the world, the broken, bleeding, bruised and sinful world, for that is where we must go to witness to the suffering love of God. Trust that wherever you go, whatever you say and however you act, this incarnational God of love and peace is with you always. May it be so! Amen

Source:

“Witnessing to the Suffering Love of God,” J. Harold McKeithen, Jr., Hidenwood Presbyterian Church, Newport News, VA