

YOU SHALL BE MY WITNESSES

A SERMON FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF
*COMMITTED TO CHRIST: SIX STEPS TO A
GENEROUS LIFE*

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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COLOSSIANS 4:5-6

This may be the hardest sermon in this series for me to write and deliver, and it may be the hardest for you to listen to. The truth is that we don't always make good witnesses.

What does it mean to be a witness? Well, in a court of law, one goes in, puts one's hand on the Bible, and swears to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Well, we're in trouble right there! We don't always know the truth, and to tell the whole truth might prove embarrassing, and as far as telling nothing but the truth, well, we're so good at embellishing, embroidering and exaggeration, it would be a shame to waste that talent!

A witness testifies, gives testimony to what has been seen, heard, experienced.

When we are witnesses to Jesus Christ, we are witnesses to what we have seen of Jesus, what we have heard about Jesus, what we have experienced of Jesus. We give testimony to the changes that Jesus has made in our lives. We give testimony to what Jesus has done in our lives.

That's hard for us. For some of us, it is difficult to speak of the deep, intimate relationship we have with Jesus Christ, to admit the grievous and heinous sins that Jesus has forgiven in our lives, to talk about the times Jesus has healed us of our afflictions, and lifted us up from despair and depression.

For others, our relationship is so tenuous, so superficial, that to tell how little we know of our Lord and Savior, and how little we have let Him into our lives, would be an embarrassment.

Dan Freeman, who was in my doctoral studies group, once said that we Presbyterians ought to be the most evangelistic of all denominations, because we've got the best system of government, the best system of theology, and don't have any of the works righteousness baggage of some of the other denominations. All you have to do to be a Presbyterian is believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. That's it.

Well, that's all you have to do to be any kind of Christian.

I'll confess. I'm not much better at witnessing, at talking about Jesus Christ with other folks, than most Presbyterians. When I talk about what God has done for me in my life, it sounds like I'm bragging. But you know, the Apostle Paul said that was all right. We can brag about our weakness and God's strength, and how we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. It isn't anything we have done to earn God's favor, it is God's unmerited grace poured out upon us, and when we praise God we stand in the tradition of the Psalmist and the prophets and the Apostles.

I guess my own best personal testimony is when I say that I'm so grateful to God for my forgiveness through Jesus Christ, for knowing that there is someone who freely and fully forgives all my sins, that if I had no hope of heaven, no promise of eternal life, his forgiveness alone would be enough to cause me to run to him and cling to him and serve him all my days.

I want to tell you about one of the times I got it right. It was more than thirty years ago, in West Virginia. I was serving as the Chaplain at the local hospital in addition to my duties as pastor of the church in town. One night, we'd had a baby born with a heart problem, and the tiny child had been air-lifted to the university hospital in Charleston for emergency surgery that night, and the father, and the grandparents, and all the family had loaded up in cars going down river to be with the baby, leaving the little mother all by herself in our hospital. I made a commitment along with the head nurse of the OB floor and the doctor who had delivered the baby that we were going to stay with the mother until we had news of the baby.

The night grew long. The doctor, a young woman who looked like an adult version of Little Orphan Annie, or maybe Raggedy Ann, was asleep in a recliner in the mother's room. The mother herself was asleep. So Fran, the nurse and I slipped out of the room and down the hall for a cup of coffee, and a cookie or two. Or four.

I don't remember what we were talking about, but all of a sudden, Fran said, "Now, I'm not a Christian..."

I'll never know how she was going to finish that sentence, because I interrupted her. "Fran," I said, "why do you say you are not a Christian?"

She said, "Well, I grew up in the church (she said which one, but I won't) that my parents still belong to. And everything I do goes against their teaching. I cut and dye my hair, I wear make-up, I wear slacks, I smoke, I drink, and I'm living with a man that isn't my husband."

"Fran," I asked, "do you believe that Jesus Christ died for your sins?" "Yes, I do, and for the sins of the world," she answered. "Do you believe that He is your Lord and your Savior?" "With all my heart," she replied. "Do you believe that if you died tonight, He'd welcome you into His kingdom of heaven?" "O Lord, I hope so." "Fran, all it takes to be a Christian is to believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. All the rest is just excess baggage. You may not be living as good a Christian life as you should, but you're a Christian."

Fran looked at me with tears in her eyes, and a smile on her face, and said, "Yes, I am, and it is time I started acting like it." She still cut her hair and dyed it blonde, and she still wore make-up and slacks, but she did quit smoking, and cut back on her drinking, and kicked her boy-friend out.

That night a little baby was born, and its heart was repaired, and that night a grown woman was born again, and her heart was set right by the Lord.

And I did not say a thing to her that any one of you could not have said, if you'd been where I was at that time.

Being a witness for Jesus Christ means being willing and able to bring His good news, His love, His story, into any conversation that you might have in your life, to testify to His love, His grace, His goodness and mercy.

Living a Christian life, walking with Jesus, every day, showing the world what it means to be a Christian, is the best witness there is, and all God asks of you.

Will you witness and share your faith in Christ?

If you are not ready, there are places to check on the card. And if you will share your faith sometimes, or frequently, if you'll look for opportunities to share your faith, there is a place for you to check. And if you are willing and able to make telling others about Jesus a priority in your life, to have the confidence to share your faith, to invite your neighbors to worship, to pray for the salvation of those who need it, there's a place for you to check as well. So check your commitment card, and as we sing our hymn, bring it forward to our treasure chest.