

Witnesses Worthy of Trust

I Corinthians 15:1-5

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost, (Nov. 15) 2020

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You don't really criticize any author to whom you have never surrendered yourself... You have to give yourself up, and then recover yourself, and the third moment is having something to say...

- T.S. Eliot

For Augustine the first question is not 'What should I believe?' or 'What should we think?' but 'Whom should we trust?' ... Belief is based upon the testimony of witnesses worthy of trust.'

- Robert Louis Wilken

In the summer of 1930, at the age of 24, Dietrich Bonhoeffer went to Union Theological Seminary in NYC for a year-long postdoctoral fellowship. Already known for his brilliance, Bonhoeffer was a rising academic star in theology in Germany. His year at Union proved to be life changing. He became close friends with Jean Lasserre, a French ministerial student who was active in the international peace movement, with Myles Horton, who by his own admission was a “hillbilly radical” from the mountains of Tennessee, and Frank Fisher, who was an African-American ministerial student from the Deep South. Fisher invited Bonhoeffer to attend Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem and the young blonde-haired Bonhoeffer went. It changed his life.

Myles Horton recalled Bonhoeffer coming into the foyer of the seminary after church that Sunday. He said they went walking because Bonhoeffer was so excited and wanted to talk about what he had seen and heard and experienced. Horton said in his excitement Bonhoeffer would start speaking in German and Horton would have to interrupt him and remind him to speak English. For the first time in his life Bonhoeffer said he heard the gospel of Jesus preached with power and conviction, and he never got over it. Bonhoeffer called it a “conversion” and later said that his experiences in Abyssinian Baptist Church turned him “from the phraseological to the real.”

Because of his African American classmate, Frank Fisher, and Myles Horton, and Jean Lasserre, Bonhoeffer learned what being a Christian was really about. He went to Abyssinian and got involved. He taught a Sunday School class and became involved with the youth group. It was there, among the black folk of Abyssinian Baptist Church, that Bonhoeffer learned there was more to this Christian life than he had known before.

In our reading today from the Apostle Paul to the Corinthian church, Paul says, “I remind you brothers and sisters of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received... For I handed on to you... what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day...” (I Cor. 15:1-4).

Paul says I preached, and *you received*, just like I had *received* earlier. The Christian gospel is something we receive from others. Our faith and what we believe is inescapably bound up with others and received from others. For example, those who have gone before us teach us how to pray and what to pray,

not simply by teaching us but by praying with us. We watch and imitate them. It might have been watching and learning from one of our parents or grandparents or it might have been a Sunday School teacher or pastor or someone else important in our lives, but we learned and still learn how to be Christian from others. We receive our faith.

Through Frank Fisher and Abyssinian Baptist, Bonhoeffer received his faith. A new faith. A faith in Christ that changed him. It was a faith that came from people who suffered, who were on the “underside” as he later wrote. And this faith he received is the faith he shared with others in Germany and it was this same faith that caused Bonhoeffer to speak out on behalf of the Jews.

My question to us this morning is, from whom do we receive our faith in Christ? To put it in an old way: Who has authority for you from whom you receive faith?

I use the word “authority” in a very old sense. Not in our modern sense of authority relating to power or coercion, but in an ancient sense of trustworthiness and reliability. In the 4th and 5th century, when Augustine was writing, the word “authority” (auctor, Latin, related to “author”) referred to one who guaranteed the validity or authenticity of a legal document. They signed their name to it; hence they were authors. Their trustworthiness was their authority (Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, p. 170-171).

Augustine said we have no “proof” of the resurrection – in other words, we cannot say, “I know it happened.” We say, “We believe it happened.” It is based on the testimony of someone else. They are our authority. In the Gospels, the women

at the empty tomb received the word from the angels that Jesus was resurrected and then ran and told the other disciples. Upon receiving their testimony, the other disciples believed. Some, a few, actually saw and met and even touched the resurrected Christ, but from then on everyone of us have believed based upon what Augustine called, the “testimony of witnesses worthy of trust” (Augustine, *The Usefulness of Belief*, in *Augustine: Earlier Writings*, p. 285; Wilken, p. 169-170). They are our authority. The scriptures are the testimony of witnesses worthy of trust. We believe the Bible is true because it is reliable; trustworthy.

Jurors do the same thing in a modern courtroom. True there are the facts of the case, there is evidence, but usually there are two opposing lawyers arguing over interpretation of the evidence. Each side calls witnesses to give testimony about the evidence. In the end, the jury must decide which witnesses are most trustworthy and therefore, render a verdict.

Who are your witnesses worthy of trust?

Remember the word “witness” originally referred to martyrs – those who gave their lives for their faith in Christ. The early church figured that those who gave their lives were trustworthy, that what they believed and lived was worth learning and imitating.

Dante Alighieri wrote *The Divine Comedy* in the early 1300’s. The work is divided into three parts: Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise. The poem made Dante famous and when he would walk down the street, people would touch him and get close to him because they wanted to know if he smelled like smoke. They would speak in whispered tones around him because they believed he had been through

hell and back. And anyone who had been through hell and back evoked respect, even awe.

We still respect anyone we know who has been through hell and back. Perhaps it was cancer or war or the loss of a child, or perhaps some other kind of trauma. But they came through it and were changed by it and we respect them. We grant them authority because they have a suffering faith, a faith which carried them through. Like the martyrs of old, they have a testimony worthy of trust.

One of the great privileges of being a pastor is the opportunity to get to know members of congregations who are witnesses worthy of trust. One of those for me was Florence Decker, who died Friday night, at age 97. Florence, along with her husband Jack (who died two years ago), and their two sons, Stan and John David, were among the founding members of Austin Heights. Florence, beautiful, elegant, and graceful, was a remarkable church musician, who played the organ and/or the piano for us from our beginning in 1968 until the early 2000's when arthritis forced her to give it up. Her signature was playing the hymn *Great Is Thy Faithfulness* on the piano, in which she utilized the entire keyboard. Archie McDonald used to say that she played notes that no one had ever thought of before. It was gorgeous, beautiful, and when she played, oh my, could we sing! You could hear Austin Heights sing outside on the highway when Florence played *Great Is Thy Faithfulness*.

It was her signature hymn not only because she played it so beautifully but also because she lived it. She and Jack trusted and lived in God's faithfulness so long that they embodied that same faithfulness. They were married for 69 years and rarely, rarely missed church until their health began to go down. They tithed

their income for all of their lives and whenever the church doors were open, they were here. It did not matter if it was a Sunday afternoon recital, or a Sunday evening children's program, or poetry reading, or panel discussion, or whatever – they were here. I asked Jack about why they showed up even if it was something that did not particularly interest them or even if they were tired. Jack said, “We show up because who knows what we might learn or what God might teach us. And we show up, not because we're interested, but because those on the program need our support.”

Now that's a testimony worthy of trust.

Witnesses worthy of trust come to us in a variety of ways. We know them in church, or they are our neighbors or family members. They are our ancestors. We also read books and articles by authors (authority) we trust and so we learn to read and listen and learn. A major part of getting an education is learning who to trust and often that happens because we had a teacher we trusted, who showed us what authors to trust.

My favorite professor at Baylor was Bob Collmer, who was at the time the chair of the English Dept. and was an authority on seventeenth century English poetry. Over the years we hosted him here two different times: once when he did a lecture on John Bunyan and once when he did a lecture on John Donne. Dr. Collmer died two years ago at age 91. I remember taking his class on the seventeenth century. He was passionate about John Donne or George Herbert or Milton or Bunyan, and he might cry when he read them and maybe shout but he never read them to us as if they were not important. I remember thinking as he cried in class while reading Donne, “This must be important. I need to learn what

he's talking about." Dr. Collmer was a witness worthy of trust and through him, I learned that John Donne and others, were also witnesses worthy of trust.

Being in the church, being disciples of Jesus means we are walking together with all sorts of witnesses worthy of trust. Our calling in Christ is learning to share a common life with all kinds of people. The church is called to be a patchwork quilt, not a one-color blanket made from the same fabric. Like Bonhoeffer learned, we walk best with Christ when we are walking together with different people.

Clarence Jordan of Koinonia Farm in Georgia used to say that among Jesus' disciples were both Matthew the tax collector and Simon the Zealot. Tax collectors worked with the Empire and made a profit from doing so, while Zealots were sworn radicals against any and all things of the Empire. So, Matthew and Simon the Zealot were enemies but, in the Gospels, they were both followers of Jesus. Clarence imagined that on any given night either of them, both of them, lay awake around the smoldering campfire, wondering if the other might try to put knife through their ribs, and he imagined day after day Jesus patiently and persistently teaching them and showing them "the more excellent way of love." Over time, by grace and the power of the Living Christ, the Holy Spirit, they became brothers in Christ. They learned how to share a common life.

Matthew learned that Simon the Zealot was a witness worthy of trust and Simon learned the same about Matthew. Because they trusted one another they could learn from one another, and they could change.

Rebecca Solnit, a writer Carrell King put me onto, quotes former Sec. of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's infamous lines about the 2002 Persian Gulf War when

he said, “There are known knowns. There are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns. That is to say, we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns, the ones we don’t know we don’t know.”

Solnit then quotes philosopher Slavoj Zizek, who said that Rumsfeld left out a fourth term: “the unknown known,” things we don’t know we know. In other words, “the real dangers are in the disavowed beliefs, suppositions, and obscene practices we pretend not to know about” (Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, p. 168).

The church is supposed to be a people who can help us know what we would prefer not to know about.

Theologians Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth, both of whom had to face the Nazis, both wrote about stupidity. And both were in complete agreement that stupidity had nothing to do with intelligence or education but with “willful ignorance” (see Bonhoeffer’s essay, *After Ten Years*). People preferred not to know. Victoria Barnett in her book *Bystanders: Conscience and Complicity During the Holocaust*, said that for many bystanders in Nazi Europe, it was not so much about what they knew, “but what they were prepared to know.” She says bystanders had an “aversion-to-crisis-faculty” meaning they had the ability and will to tune out what they did not want to know (p. 52). They were willfully stupid.

Part of the job of our witnesses worthy of trust is to keep us from being stupid.

Now, I know, and you know, in these days of Covid it is a challenge to get out of our silos and our isolation, in which we easily become self-absorbed. We live on social media talking to and reading people just like us and after a while, it is easy to become stupid. We are overwhelmed and we become willfully ignorant and develop an “aversion-to-crisis-faculty.”

That is all the more reason we need witnesses worthy of trust who will challenge us and help us know what we have preferred not to know. Because we trust them, we will listen and learn from them, and be open to the Holy Spirit changing us.

I notice there are already multiple articles on how White people are tired of talking about racism. We're ready to go on to some other concern. Our “aversion-to-crisis faculty” is tired and we want no more crises. Stupid is much more comfortable.

This is why we need our friendships with Zion Hill First Baptist Church and Iron Wheel Baptist Church, and it is why we must work at it, especially during these isolating Covid days. Our friends in those churches challenge our Whiteness. And it is all the more important that people like me – White men – listen and learn from you, my own sisters and brothers who are people of color. You not only keep me from being stupid, you help me know and walk with the living God, alongside of you.

Jason Byassee, a theologian in Vancouver and a good friend, wrote a review in a recent *Christian Century* (Oct. 21, 2020) on our mutual friend, Willie Jennings, newest book *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*. Willie is a

black Baptist theologian and Jason writes, “Jennings’s vignettes are powerful, so much so that my White self, not yet quite crucified, often objected to them as I read them... Then I’d remember that I trust Jennings, and I hope for the death of my old Adam” (p. 43).

The Apostle Paul says we receive the gospel from others. This is a life-long process. We receive and keep receiving. It’s not easy. Indeed, it can be so hard that it is like taking up the cross or being crucified. We are dying to our old self. But the very gospel we’ve received also tells me that God in Christ is redeeming us.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.