

Can I Get a Witness?

Matthew 28:11-20

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In a real sense all life is inter-related. All men [sic] are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be... This is the inter-related structure of reality.

— Martin Luther King Jr., *Letter from Birmingham Jail*

Many years ago, when I was young, single, and in much better shape than I am now, I found myself standing in court before a judge in Washington, D.C. I had been arrested in front of the United States State Department for sitting in the driveway and blocking traffic. Along with several other clergy – black, white, and brown, male and female we had joined together in non-violent civil disobedience. The judge said, “You may make a statement before sentencing.” In other words, I was being given the opportunity to give a testimony. To be a witness.

I said, “Your honor, I am a follower of Jesus Christ and therefore, I believe that the United States killing people in villages of Central America is wrong. And while everyone agrees it is complicated, I also know that the bottom-line, is I need to say something and do something. It’s wrong because of Jesus and I’m a follower of Jesus.”

The judge said, “You are sentenced to five days.” Then he banged his gavel and the bailiff led me off to the Washington D.C. Department of Corrections for my five-day stay.

I’ve long thought about what I said and if I should have said it differently. I could have talked more about United States foreign policy or American politics or how the U.S. support of mercenaries in Central America was counter-productive to U.S. interests. I could have said a lot of things. Instead, I chose to give my testimony that I was a follower of Jesus. I chose to be a witness.

Ever since I was a kid in the First Baptist Church of Stamford, Texas I had been taught Matthew 28:19-20 “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” Before I could even read, I was taught how to witness, which usually meant, always be ready to go up to someone and ask them “Do you know Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior?” and if they don’t know or if they hesitate too long, you need to be able to tell them about Jesus. I grew up knowing I Peter 3:15, “Always be ready to give your testimony to anyone who asks you to give an accounting of the hope that is in you.”

I still believe I Peter 3:15. We need to be ready to give our testimony of the hope that is in us. I still believe that we are commanded by the Risen Christ, in his final instructions just before his ascension, to make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Triune God, teaching them to obey Jesus. I still believe that. How we do that and what that looks like is much different from when I first learned it in my childhood, but I still believe it. And that day standing in the courtroom in

Washington D.C. I knew that I was being asked to give an accounting of the hope that was in me. I was being asked, “Why do you do what you do?”

This implies that we should live in such a way that raises the question. Why are you the way you are? Why do you feed the hungry? Why is your church inclusive? Why do you believe integrity is important? Why do you believe that we should teach our children to love others, especially if others are different? Why do you believe it is wrong to kill people in farming villages in Central America? Why do you believe putting your knee on the necks of black men is wrong? To answer these questions, and so many more, is to be a witness.

It means we are to live in such a way that our lives point to Jesus Christ. For better or worse, if we are baptized as disciples of Jesus Christ, then how we live should point to him. That’s being a witness. We’re either good and faithful witnesses or we’re bad and unfaithful witnesses but we are witnesses. Related to being a witness is giving testimony, which simply means putting our faith into words. Testifying, or giving testimony, means saying what we believe in simple, everyday words.

Another verse of Scripture I was taught when I was a little boy was Acts 10:34 in which Peter says, “I truly understand that God is no respecter of persons.” The Apostle Peter is speaking to a Gentile, a Roman centurion named Cornelius. Both are struggling with the call from God that cross every boundary they’ve ever known. Is God calling Cornelius, who is an army officer for the Empire, who is not a Jew, and not of the same race, to be a follower of Jesus? Peter realizes, God calls every person, no matter who they are, what color skin, or where they’re from. That was a very big deal for Jewish Peter to learn.

And it was a big lesson for six-year-old Kyle to learn as I watched on television black boys and girls being washed down the street with high-velocity water hoses and with police dogs attacking them in Birmingham in the summer of 1963. Part of the way my parents answered my anguished questions was “God is no respecter of persons,” or “God is not prejudiced or racist.” In 1963 in the South, in Texas, that was an important lesson for a little white boy to learn.

My parents were not “liberals.” My dad voted Republican in every election of his life. My mother voted Democrat. But both testified to their son, that judging people by the color of their skin was wrong, and not only wrong, it was against Jesus.

Peter was no “liberal” either. And he was not a conservative or whatever label we use to dismiss people with views contrary to ours. Peter was a follower of Jesus, who was learning that his life was rooted in the very God he had come to know in Jesus and in Jesus’ last words. Make witnesses throughout the entire world in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – or what the church learned to call the Trinity.

Just as the God we know as Trinity is perfect communion, perfect relationship, and perfect unity, then as we live into this God and this God lives in us, we become defined more and more by this same communion and relationship with others, no matter what color their skin, or their nationality, or whether they are gay or straight or tall or short, young or old. And therefore, we do not sic dogs on them, shoot them in villages in Central America, or put our knees on their necks.

We are to be witnesses of this God who binds us together in unity and friendship, diverse people bound to one another because we are bound to the God we know as Trinity.

As many of you know, our Austin Heights Quilting Ministry makes quilts for people who request them. Usually it is for someone who is ill or facing surgery or going through some crisis. They get a quilt with intricate needlework done by seamstresses of our church. Many of our banners and paraments displayed in worship here have also been made by the Quilters and Pauline Patterson. Each one has a network of very fine, golden threads, delicately running through the patterns, connecting all the parts of the quilt or the parament.

This golden thread reminds us of our connections with one another with and through the God known as Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit.

I remind you that the word “religion” comes from the same root word as “ligaments.” It is what connects us. As the old hymn says, these are the “ties that bind.”

We are tied together by the sacred ligaments of the Trinitarian God. That’s our testimony.

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