

“Can I Get a Witness?”

Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

I went to seminary in Chicago. It was such an exciting time because McCormick Theological Seminary, where I went, was such a diverse place. So, when we were learning and having our preaching classes we would go to where all of the different students were having the opportunity to preach.

We went to Asian services. Hispanic services. African American services - and they were so different. Let's face it, for a white guy from northern Minnesota who thought Finlanders were the minority - that was pretty amazing to experience. So I went to a number of African American services, where friends of mine were preaching.

One of the things that was a theme during that time was, when they needed the congregation to get more enthusiastic, they would say “Can I get a witness?” Then someone would chime in; and afterward we would sit down as a group and critique each other and ask how things went, and why you did what you did or said what you said.

So we asked some of the African American students why did you say: “Can I get a witness?” Was it just to get a response?” They said, “In part, but it keeps the rhythm, keeps them [the congregation] involved because, let's face it, when we heard yours [sermon] it was long and there wasn't a whole lot of opportunity to get real involved.” [Laughter]

But that isn't the only reason they holler out, “Can I get a witness?” It was to constantly remind the congregation - in a very real and meaningful way - what their role was when they left the Sanctuary. They were to be witnesses. “Can I get a witness?” wasn't just to get a response. It was, “Can I get a witness to leave this place and do the ministry of Jesus Christ - to share that vision.”

In one of the churches I was in, and with one of my friends, a number of the women were dressed in nurse's outfits. Now that kind of made me wonder, “Do people get so carried away that their hearts have trouble, or what is the deal here? Why do they keep all of these nurses on standby?”

He said, “No, they were spiritual guides who care for the people - their prayer lives - to heal their souls. They [those in nurse's outfits] would come up afterward and would pray with whomever needed that kind of support. Those whose souls were sick with sin that day could receive the care of these women, who would pray over them. I found it so amazing that there were people that had jobs and tasks to speak to people's deepest needs.

When I went back there another time I paid attention to what happened after the service. It was amazing the number of people who went to the nurses - who were witnesses to the Gospel of Jesus Christ - caring for those in need.

I looked up in the dictionary the definition of “witness.” It says, “To hear or know by personal presence or perception. These witnesses, whether they were the nurses who were on standby, or people who were hollering back to the pastor - each time they said that, they were claiming to have personal presence with our Lord. To have a perception that was personal and intimate between them and God.

So, to witness, to be a witness for Jesus Christ, is more than just knowing biblical facts. It is having a personal relationship with God in such a way that you feel - not just know - but feel what it is to be in the presence of God, and the Holy Spirit moving through our hearts. I will never forget what an impact those congregations and those loving and faithful people made, and why being a witness is so important in the life of every single congregation.

Now, often this sense of perception is found in the negative, in what we are missing. So, for example, I was reading an article, because I used to love to play tennis and I love to watch it. One of my favorite players when I was younger was Boris Becker. If you are tennis people you know that name. Boris Becker was the youngest person to win Wimbledon and he won it more than once. When he was at the height of his career and had all of the accolades - he was rich, had every material gift he could ever want - he said he felt hopeless and empty inside. He said he was so unhappy and had no inner peace. He felt like a puppet on a string and struggled many times in his life with finding any meaning or reason to live.

Now, if you like thrillers, you have heard of Jack Higgins. He was a wonderful, successful writer of thrillers. His stuff is all over the place. When he was at the top of his profession he was reported to have said, that when you get to the top there is nothing there.

The Christian Church has an answer to that emptiness, but we have to be willing to witness for people to be able to hear it and be changed. *We* have to have enough faith to believe it and enough courage in our conviction and faith to share it. So, how do we do that, how do we bring the infinite to the finite? How do we struggle to find the joy and hope that comes through Jesus Christ?

The father of our Presbyterian Church, John Calvin, refers to it as the “principle of accommodation.” Calvin understood the principle of accommodation to mean “adjusting or adapting to meet a particular situation.” What makes God so wonderful is that God - who is so powerful and infinite, so amazing - is willing to be, to come down to our level to accommodate to our lack of understanding, to our lack of faith, and speak to us where we live. To transform us to witness to us through the Holy Spirit. John Calvin said, “Think about what that means, to have a God who is willing to come down to belittle God’s self, even to the point of dying on the cross - in the hope that we will listen and respond to the Divine.

Christianity is an experiential religion, sometimes we call it the religion of the book because we put so much emphasis on the Bible, but at the end of the day the Bible is not what we worship. We still call upon the Holy Spirit to have that experiential relationship with God, and God is sitting there waiting for us to have a part in it. We need that. The way we help others witness, and the way we witness, is to go to the place where people suffer, like those nurses; and we say, “How can God help you? What do you need? Let’s pray about it together.” There is nowhere else to find that hope and that joy except through God and Jesus Christ.

Paul Elmer Moore is one of America’s greatest Platonist philosophers. He started out not having any faith - scoffing at the faith. He continued to find great joy and the beauty of Platonic philosophy, but then slowly as he peeled away that philosophy he realized it didn’t answer the most fundamental questions of his life. He said, “I had a sense of a bleak part in an empty, solitary soul and it drove me to become a Christian.”

The Marxist Analysis was supposed to be the answer to this evil religion that we have, when the revolution came that emptiness would disappear; but everywhere the revolution came with Marxist Communism the emptiness remained. It was not the answer.

John-Paul Sartre, the great French philosopher, pointed out the disconcerting truth that we cannot find happiness in anything human or created. He made the comment that we are condemned to be free. He had no faith; and in that, he realized that fulfillment would permanently elude not just him but all of us, because there is no God. And, sadly, no one was ever able to witness to him in such a way that would change that fatalistic life view. This feeling of despair and dissatisfaction is our opportunity to witness - to share that Gospel message.

It was St. Augustine who made the most beautiful comment: "You have made us for yourself, God, and our hearts are restless except when they find rest in you." That is the only place that we will ever find rest and fulfillment. It's the only place where death has an answer. Death is a threat we cannot control and it is one we have great anxiety over. So we respond to that as one avenue of dissatisfaction and fear, and we bring our nurse into that prayer life to care for somebody in those moments.

Faith is about believing that certain things are true, but that isn't all; faith is also trusting a basic belief in God. Many Christian people believe that all you have to do is somehow acknowledge that God exists, and you are a Christian; or that Jesus died for us, and you are a Christian. That isn't enough. You also have to trust - but that isn't enough, you have to act on it.

I would like to share an analogy that helps explain it by one of my favorite theologians, Alistair McGrath, a British Theologian. He said it's like a bottle of penicillin that you set on your end table by your bed. He said, "You have blood poisoning. You need that penicillin to live, so as it sits there on that end table, you acknowledge that that bottle of penicillin exists, but having it sit there - existing - doesn't mean that it is going to help you. You can even trust that that bottle of penicillin will heal you, but that isn't going to save you.

"The only thing that works is not belief in its existence, or trust that it will work - you actually have to take it and pour it down inside of you. Your action of taking it and receiving it unto yourself will save you from blood poisoning. The same thing applies to the Christian faith. You can believe that it exists - this God of ours. You can even trust that God could save your life for all eternity, but unless you act on it and take God into your heart, nothing happens. We must *receive* God.

Soren Kierkegaard, the great existentialist, said we must "take that leap of faith." It is still required of us. Most of us are never going to get knocked off a horse, get scales over our eyes for three days, and then be healed and feel the very presence of God speaking to us. (I think I'm grateful for that sometimes.) But we are going to experience the opportunity to believe and to trust, and the last question: "Are we going to act on it?" by asking the Holy Spirit into our hearts, and sharing the wonderful gifts that God has given you and me. Are we going to share those [gifts] with other people so that they too can receive the blessing that we have received? It is our task to believe, to trust and to receive.

My dear friends, "Do I have a witness?" I hope so.

Amen.