

EASTER THREE, YEAR B, 2021

With all of the cell phones, dash cams, body cams, and a number of other devices that we all own today the realization is that anyone can video an event or incident as it is happening. You just have to turn on the news to see, a lot of these videos. In many cases these videos actually do become “eye witness” accounts and are often used to help gather all the facts in a case so discernment can be made about whatever event has been videotaped. But just like human beings who can witness the same event and have different stories about what happened so too videos that are shot from different positions can also tell a different story.

I bring all this up today to talk about what it means to be a witness. The dictionary describes witness as someone who has or who claims to have knowledge relevant to an event or other matter of interest. An eyewitness is one who testifies what they perceived through his or her senses. Most of the time we think of a witness as someone who has seen an accident, a horrible incident or a crime being committed. When one is a witness in a court of law, the lawyers and judges generally don't care about your opinion they simply want to know what you know, what you saw, what you heard. In court, we don't have to draw conclusions or make arguments – all we must do is tell the truth as we know it.

However, witnessing is more than just seeing a crime or tragic event happen. A witness can also verify certain facts. When you apply for a marriage license you have to take a witness along to verify that they know you for a certain length of time. I had the unique experience of being the witness for my mother when she applied for a marriage license at the age of 65 before she married her first boyfriend, Frank, who was also widowed. The application expects accuracy and the witness hopes to verify it. One of the items requested was the place of birth of their parents. This turned into a comedy routine as both my mom and Frank were trying to recall the names of the little villages in Italy where each of their parents had been born. After a lot of back and forth the clerk finally threw her hands up in the air and said, just put down Italy. Now when I perform a marriage, I have to have two witnesses sign the marriage certificate who can verify the marriage took place. The same is true at baptisms. Even though we call them godparents they are really witnesses who agree to make sure the child is brought up in the Christian faith.

And this all leads me to the question what does it mean for us to be a witness to our faith? How do we witness to our Christian faith? In today's Gospel Jesus tells the disciples that “You are witnesses to these things.” He doesn't say you WILL be my witnesses or please consider being my witnesses if you have the time. He simply states the fact you ARE my witnesses – you are my witnesses of my love, healing, justice and peace to the world and to all nations. The same is true for us. To be a witness is central to our life as Christians. To be a witness sums up everything we as Christians are to be and do. Our feelings, thoughts, perspectives, choices, actions, words and direction of our life's journey all should reflect how we witness to others about how Jesus' teachings and very life and love have impacted us.

Being a Christian witness is not simply to repeat what we have heard or read in the Bible. It is to give our lives as evidence of the truth we proclaim. This is about choosing to live your life as a witness. I think we often look at people like Martin Luther, Mother Theresa, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King as people who are true Christian

witnesses. But we don't have to do something great like them or do anything extraordinary to be a witness for Christ. We just need to do the small things.

Everything we do in life, is to remember Christ's call to the disciples, and to us: you are witnesses. We are the ones who tell the story of Christ's grace and love.

That's true in the way we raise our kids, and the way we love our family. That's true in the way we work, and the way we volunteer. It's true in how we treat our neighbors. It's true in the way we decide to use the things God has given us. How we use our talents. How we spend our money. How we share our excess. It's true in every choice that we make.

Being a witness is transformative and points to our identity, our calling and commitment to our own belief and faith. It is the acknowledgement that the good news of Jesus matters, that his proclamation of a loving and forgiving God to a broken world is what we need to show others.

Think of it this way. We may be the only gospel another person will read. And we do that by living what we say we believe. Consider the following poem by Brian Cavanaugh:

The gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John
Are read by more than a few.
But the one that is most read and commented on
Is the gospel according to you.
You are writing a gospel, a chapter each day,
By the things that you do and the words that you say.
People read what you write, whether faithless or true.
Say, what is the gospel according to you?
Do others read His truth and His love in your life?
Or has yours been too full of malice and strife?
Does your life speak of evil, or does it ring true?
Say, what is the gospel according to you?

There's a story that back in the early 90's there was a shock jock who was on the airwaves in Atlanta Georgia that was especially crude and obnoxious about Christians. Eventually a contract dispute made him leave and take a job as a car salesman. A few years later an article appeared in a Christian Journal about this very shock jock. In the article this DJ said he was converted to Christianity by the quiet witness of one of the salesmen he worked with. Here was a person who so vehemently attacked Christians had had his heart changed by the quiet actions of another.

In one way or another, all of our lessons remind us of our call to be "witnesses," to show others how God in Jesus has impacted our lives. And it is okay that most of us are quiet witnesses, like the man who was instrumental in the conversion of the shock jock. It has been proven that people respond best to indirect and gentle witness, things they can observe and hear and think about on their own time and in their own way. This is what being a quiet witness is about, telling the truth as you know it and nothing more.

Leonard Sweet, the former dean of Drew seminary, says: A witness loves God with all their heart, mind, soul and strength; walks daily a Samaritan Road that tends to the least, the last, the lost; is someone that walks humbly, loves mercy, and does justice;

extends forgiveness to the unforgiveable; holds out hope to the hopeless; invites the hungry to dinner when their own stomach growls and sees life as an opportunity to witness, not as an opportunity to “win.”

We are witnesses when we can invite someone to look into our lives and find Jesus there. We are witnesses when we allow ourselves to be touched by folks who are lost and afraid and show them the love of Christ. We are witnesses when we live in a way that defies any explanation other than the presence of the risen Christ within us. We are witnesses of these things, so let us tell it, live it, become it but most of all show it. Amen.