

Witnesses

Let's begin with a couple of stories.

Shortly after my sister got her learner's permit to drive, I, being a dutiful older brother, agreed to ride in the passenger seat to the grocery store. We did our shopping, returned to the car. She cranked the engine, checked her mirrors twice, like a good student driver and put the car into gear. As she slowly eased the car out the parking space, some maniac in a very large vehicle came careening around the corner, and skidded into the parking space nearest the door. After briefly yelling epithets about behavior into the darkened cabin of the vehicle, a frenzied parent emerged and bolted into the grocery store.

Now, I'm not one to judge anyone for their driving.

But we continued backing out, we spotted one of those *ichthus* fishes that some Christians put on their vehicles. They were very popular in the town where I grew up. They were everyone, in all sorts of permutations: a big *Truth* fish swallowing a *Darwin* fish... Two big fish with a school of little fish swimming around them... My personal favorite was the fish that read simply, *gefilte*.

The fish is one of the earliest Christian symbols, a means by which persecuted Christians recognized one another.

What happened next my sister has never let me live down. I said, tongue in cheek, "Clearly, Christians can't drive."

Here's our second story. One of the priests of a neighboring Catholic parish agreed to teach a class for my congregation, and so to thank him, I took him out to lunch after church. We went to our local Chinese restaurant, got a booth, ordered our food, and set about mangling our dumplings by trying to cut them with only our chopsticks. While we were eating, some folks came into the restaurant and took the booth a couple of seats away from us. They were clearly dressed as though they'd come from church. As they proceeded to order, loudly, I couldn't help but notice that the words *please* and *thank you* were conspicuously absent from their treatment of their server, but that wasn't what bothered me most. When it came time to order drinks, one of group began to quiz the server about the wine list. I'm thinking, "Buddy, if you wanted the Four Seasons, don't come to the lunch buffet."

The server, who was clearly underage, didn't have answers.

The man challenged her, "Well what do you mean you don't know? You sell it don't you?"

His poor treatment of their server peaked when he curtly said, "Well, just give me the Bloody Mary, then."

That's when I recognized a member of the group from a Presbytery committee on which I served. I slid down in the booth in the vain hopes that she wouldn't see me.

Fortune did not favor me, and she got up to go to the restroom and promptly came over to chat, introducing herself to the priest as a member of *Name Withheld to Protect the Innocent Presbyterian Church*.

After she left, the priest looked at me and said, "They're yours, are they?"

"Oh no," I said, "I'm not claiming them."

So, our quick object lesson on the behavioral patterns of Christians is that they can't drive and they're rude.

What was that Jesus said about witnesses?

A 2019 Pew Research Center report notes that the percentage of Americans who identify as Christian dropped by 12 percentage points in the last decade.¹

The Washington Post reported in March that membership in churches, synagogues and mosques for the first time represents a minority of Americans.²

I'm not overwhelmingly bothered by these statistics because the changing ways emerging generations feel about *joining* organizations is well documented.

It did, though, put me in mind of an article I read a while back about the rise of atheism in the United States.

Now, before I say a thing about this, we should acknowledge that there are a lot of different flavors of atheism, just as there are many flavors of faith, and before the church opens our mouth to speak, we should listen. We may very well find that the version of God many folks can't believe in is one we have never even heard of, let alone met. Some images of God frankly need rejection.

People of faith should pay attention to what makes other people reject a caricature of God.

I wonder if the contraction of the institutional church has something to do with *those* versions of God.

First Church is a growing church, even with virtual worship services in the midst of a pandemic. I wonder if our growth could be as closely tied to the false versions of God we have rejected as the God whom we proclaim. Listen to what the authors said about why people are leaving religion:

¹ <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>

² https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2021/03/29/church-membership-fallen-below-majority/?fbclid=IwAR1q_xUuiKW7HKGeh-AS6c-D7SCJHIUxd-MCigjQY7X1ISdybJ4OoGVY0PI

“It’s primarily a backlash against the religious Right, say political scientists Robert Putnam and David Campbell. In their book, *American Grace*, they argue that the religious Right’s politicization of faith in the 1990s turned younger, socially liberal Christians away from churches, even as conservatives became more zealous. The dropouts were turned off by churches’ Old Testament condemnation of homosexuals, premarital sex, contraception and abortion. The Catholic Church’s sex scandals also prompted millions to equate religion with moralistic hypocrisy.”³

Now what was that Jesus said about witnesses?

For a while, when we were seeing a lot of violence out of the middle east, I would hear folks say something like, “Well, if the peace-loving Muslims would repudiate the violence of their extremist counterparts, it would go a long way to helping people not be afraid of them.”

There’s so much wrong with that statement, but according to that article, *Christians need to do the same thing!*

After all, Jesus said he needs *witnesses*.

It is not realistic to point out to rude restaurant goers that their behavior makes a mockery of their savior they just came from worshipping. Neither is there anything to gain by stalking discourteous drivers to the dairy aisle. But there is something to be learned here, for ourselves, for our witness.

Now, we Christians contemplate the nature of our lives throughout the season of Lent. We consider what claims our faith in Jesus Christ exercises on our lives.

I suspect many of us stuck to the macro-view. We thought in terms of big ideas – you know, taking on a new discipline for Lent, thinking about what we give to support the ministry of Jesus Christ – the sorts of nuts-and-bolts ways that Jesus’ followers make it clear to those who encounter us in our lives that Jesus is our savior.

But perhaps now, post-Easter, post-resurrection, the time is upon us to take a *micro-view*. Perhaps we are as well served to think of the imperceptible ways that our faith shapes us - or doesn’t.

Perhaps we should look inward at our own lives to the ways that our general being in the world either contributes to *communion* or breaks it down.

Because that’s really what attitudes and tone of voice and the almost imperceptible ways we present ourselves do – we either contribute to the communion of the world or we contribute to its breakdown.

That’s really a pretty simple idea – that *either* we are working for the up-building of community *or* the tearing down of it.

³ The Week, April 20, 2012. P11

That is also a very hard claim to live with. It's the notion that there are few or no irrelevant actions.

Nothing is completely value neutral.

Objects and tools, such as money and time may be value neutral, but *actions* are not.

Whether we like it or not, we're either doing the one thing... or we're doing the other.

If we contribute to the incivility of public discourse through our words, our attitudes – even our Facebook profiles and our twitter accounts – we're doing the one. Or we're doing the other. Either we're building up community, contributing to the communion of the world, or we're tearing it down, we're vandalizing the sense of community.

That's a huge job!

But Jesus did say he needed some witnesses.

Realistically, I get that we're not all going to be nice all of the time.

I've never forgotten a congregant that I had in Indianapolis – he's deceased now but he wouldn't have minded me telling you this if he were alive because he genuinely became a friend – he was a crank and a curmudgeon.

I don't think I ever heard one good thing come out of his mouth.

He was asthmatic, rheumatic and phlegmatic, and that translated into a cantankerous and cranky outlook on life.

When I finally found I was near my breaking point, my boss, Bill Enright, said to me, "Well, say something to him about it, then."

So the next time he was being a crank, I turned to him and asked, "Do you even hear yourself? You're giving Christians a bad name."

He replied, and this is where I came around, "Oh, you should hear what I'm *not* saying. If I *weren't* a Christian, I could really cut loose on these people..."

Some of us constitutionally can only hope not to do too much damage to community, I suppose.

But for the rest of us, Jesus says he needs a witness.

Whether you are wearing your *ichthus* fish or talking about your church, you are a witness every single second of every single day.

You are a witness at the La Colombe counter. You are a witness sitting on a bench in Rittenhouse Square. You are a witness in the day-care drive-through.

Indeed, you are a witness in the grocery-store parking lot and the Chinese restaurant.

Attitudes matter.

Words matter.

Feelings matter.

Body language matters.

It's all part of the witness.

It's overwhelming, no?

It takes a lot of effort to maintain that kind of focus, all the time.

Maybe if we need help maintaining our focus, we could think about those scars on Jesus' hands and feet, the ones that the doubters needed to see in order to come to believe?

I know liberal, mainline protestants don't tend to focus on all the blood of the crucifixion outside of Holy Week. We worry a lot more about our ethical stands and what we're teaching. And that's all good.

But maybe, sometimes, we need to see those marks on his hands and side to be reminded what sort of witnesses Jesus needs.

Those scars show how much we matter to God. And so it's the scars to which we witness.

Maybe that can keep us focused. Maybe when we think about Jesus' hands and feet and side, it might just sort of reshape how we see the world.

The way I told those opening illustrations was, of course, just dripping with judgment. I get that. It's easy to be glib about others' behavior.

But maybe the judgment needs to be turned in on ourselves and how we go about our daily lives?

Trust me, I know that mainline Protestants also don't like talking about judgment. We avoid it, as a general rule.

But sometimes we all do need to turn a little judgment – on ourselves – so that we can take assessment of where we stand in terms of building up the people that Christ died to save. Or whether we are tearing down the people that Christ died to save alongside us.

Because I'm pretty sure when we come to our end, when God's way is a little clearer for us, when we catch a glimpse of the kingdom that Jesus preached about and worked for and calls us to live in even now, we'll see how much more needs doing.

It has not escaped my notice that I'm really saying, that if we're going to be decent witnesses to Jesus, then we need to *be decent people!*

And it's true, we do.

But it goes so much deeper than that. It's about cultivating a habit of mind, a way of being that is so steeped in the transformative power of the resurrection that we can't imagine being any other way.

Last summer, I said something to you at the end of every one of my midweek messages:
Remember how profoundly you are loved.

Those scars are the proof of that love.

And Jesus is asking for a few witnesses.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.