

I don't blog, I don't instagram, I don't twit or tweet – I have something of a general antipathy toward social media: I recently completed a forty-eight hour boycott of Facebook before I remembered I needed to contact someone whose e-mail address I no longer had. It only took a couple of baby pictures and my desire to wish an old friend happy birthday and I was sucked back into what Betty White has characterized as a colossal waste of time.

My antipathy arises from a number of sources – chiefly that I just don't believe you have to tell everything you know and not everything I know is all that interesting. And, that what I know that *is* actually interesting or useful isn't typically communicable in 120 characters.

I probably have as much antipathy toward political grandstanding as I do about social media. I've recently been considering exiting social media again until after the inauguration next year, because I'm pretty sure social media is going to cost more friendships in the next few months than it is going to reinitiate.

But I did see something useful the other day, aside from baby pictures, and it was the comedienne, Ellen DeGeneres speaking out against the so-called religious freedom laws that seem to be cropping up all across the south and a handful of other places. I have promised you that I won't be partisan up here, and I have also promised you that I will unabashedly continue to preach the ethical claims of the Gospel and let you apply them how you see fit. These laws are bad representations of Christianity. They don't represent the Jesus Christ of the Gospel. I'm on the record in the AJC with a number of clergy as opposed to them, and as Governor Deal demonstrated in his remarks regarding his veto of

Georgia's law, people of both parties can be against discriminatory laws and do so from the vantage point of their faith. So Ellen DeGeneres, stood up in front of her audience and began speaking and she said, "I'm not a political person, I shy away from politics, but this isn't political, this is about human rights."

And what DeGeneres, a presumed democrat, and Deal, a republican did in their respective moments of opposition, was to make a witness.

As I was thinking about their witnesses, my eye wandered over to the bookshelves in my office and I began musing about the their contents, specifically, which authors represented on those shelves would be of any significance to this congregation in the absence of my citing them. And the truth is that outside of the authors I most often cite – and you can probably name them – Anne Lamott and Frederick Buechner – most of the names of these authors who poured themselves into their work would be meaningless outside of my work.

But a handful practically leapt off the shelf for their significance. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, martyred by the Nazis, Karl Barth, author of the Barmen Declaration, also against the Nazis, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who faced the possibility of assassination every day of his life for years for his leadership against apartheid, Martin Luther, whose leadership of the Protestant Reformation could have cost him his life, and Martin Luther King, whose leadership in the Civil Rights movement did. John Calvin, a parish pastor who had the distinction of serving the same parish twice: before and after they kicked out for his beliefs about scripture and the church...

The people of significance, the people we remember, were the people who offered a witness.

Their witness was costly. It cost life, or security, and for that we remember them.

Bearing witness can be terrifying as well. I have to assume that it was for Ananias, because of something he said.

Given the task of going to Saul, who had been breathing threats and murder against the Christians, Ananias replied, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.”

Let this sink in for a second, The Lord speaks to him in a vision, and his reply is, “But I’d really rather not, he’s known to be mean.”

And the Lord says, “Go anyway.” That’s a paraphrase, but that’s what the Lord said.

Bearing witness can cost security, it can cost life, it can be terrifying, and with all that acknowledged, let me put it plainly: Christians are called to be witnesses.

Now, one of the things I hope you know about me, since I seem to be skirting up next to politics in my illustrations today is that you don’t have to agree with me politically to be a person of deep faith and I know that. In fact, it is a point of some pride with me that my friends range across a broad spectrum. I, frankly, find group-think boring. So I had lunch not so long ago with a friend of mine and the topic of social justice came up, and that is really is what we’re witnessing about: social justice, and she said to me, “Can we please find a different term to use than ‘social justice?’ I am becoming allergic to the phrase because I hear it used to justify only one approach to problem solving, and I know that I’m working for justice too, just in a different way. If it’s so narrow, it’s meaningless.”

I was thinking her comment the other day and I stumbled across a blog, on social media,

no less, from a Lutheran pastor in Raleigh, and I thought he had just the right answer to the problem.

He wrote, “But I also know that, at least in some ways, social justice can be talked about as a savior in some instances...and that’s just not scriptural. It’s evidence of the Savior’s work. It’s a call of the Savior. But social justice is not Jesus; it’s easy to fall into that rabbit hole, though...especially when Jesus is largely thought to be assumed in the church’s work.” He goes on:

“We need Jesus along with justice, people. We don’t need exclusive “social justice,” but rather “social Jesus.” We need growth in faith while also being invited to act on that faith in real, tangible, life-changing/system-changing/world-changing ways. We need that Jesus who speaks to our inner faith and discipleship growth as well as calls us out of our comfort zones to engage the world... ‘Social Jesus.’ I might trademark that...”¹

I love that! The corrective of being hung up on politics is to be hung up instead on Jesus. The corrective of privileging our own bias is to privilege instead the bias of Jesus!

You and I are called to a personal witness – to Jesus Christ.

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Do I need to say it again?

We can’t get around it. It’s the heart of discipleship. It is the heart of what it means to be a Christian. As I said a few weeks back, we’re not so much saved *from* as we are saved *for*.

We are saved *for* the witness to God’s redeeming work in the world.

¹ reluctantxtian.wordpress.org

If you follow the story of the Bible from start to finish, the narrative thread that goes from Genesis to Revelation is that God is calling out from the creation particular people – the Israelites first, and then later the Christians are grafted into that work – to witness to the saving, redeeming work of God in the world, first made known in the history of Israel and then in the person of Jesus Christ. We are called as witnesses to these things.

Indeed, in the book of Revelation, John, usually assumed to be the same man who wrote the Gospel and letters of John, is given a vision as a very old man living on the remote island of Patmos in cave. It is a sweeping vision of the inevitable victory of God over evil and sin.

Revelation was traditionally taught as having been written in a particular style so that it could provide hope to an oppressed people. But Brian Blount, perhaps the finest New Testament Scholar of our time, notes that the time of the writing of Revelation, generally assumed to be around the year ninety, falls within the reign of Domitian, during which there was no wholesale persecution of Christians.

Brian writes, “The evidence suggests that John was writing about the *expectation* of persecution rather than the present *experience* of persecution. The problem lay with the imminent conflict he knew would erupt if his hearers and his readers lived out the kind of nonaccommodating Christianity that he himself professed. He was concerned primarily about the claims of Lordship declared by Rome and Caesar... Resisting those demands would invite trouble. Trouble however, had apparently not yet arisen.”²

So, Revelation wasn't necessarily written to an oppressed community at all - it was written to a community that was not oppressed at all precisely *because* they'd figured out how not to give a witness. And in fact, they had figured out how *not* to give a witness

² Brian Blount, Revelation in *The New Testament Library*. (WJK, Louisville, 2009) p118

precisely to avoid the type of witness that costs something.

It leads Blount to the conclusion, “If John was indeed asking his people to stand up and stand out in a world they had accepted, a world that accepted them, he was essentially telling them to go out and pick a fight! He was ordering them to declare that they were now nonaccommodating Christians, who could no longer participate in a world that had not really noticed them because they had heretofore been accommodating to it. In a classic “Don’t ask, don’t tell” (that I’m a Christian) kind of environment, John was essentially ordering his Christians to be about the business of telling on themselves, with the full knowledge of the kind of repercussions that such telling would bring.”³

In other words, John is challenging Christians who have it easy with the words, “Can I get a witness?”

John wants his Christians not so much to be meek lambs as he wants them to be witnessing “s’lambs⁴”.

The witness that is memorable is the one that is costly – costly of security, costly of the life we have, costly of the perceptions we would rather not relinquish.

But anything less is cheap. You remember cheap grace – Cheap grace is the opposite, it’s the imposter of free grace – because it is the grace that demands no change. It’s cheap.

Peter Marty tells the story of Larry Trapp, Grand Dragon of the Nebraska Ku Klux Kan.

In the late 1980s and early '90s, Larry Trapp took great joy in harassing Jewish people, immigrants, and people of color. He made threatening phone calls, sent out hate mail, and

³ Ibid.

⁴ This is Brian Blount’s abbreviation for *slaughtered lambs*. For more, see prior footnote. My understanding is it is not meant to celebrate the slaughter of innocents so much as to indicate the wiliness to witness.

encouraged his followers to commit acts of violence against non-white and Jewish people. But Larry Trapp made a mistake when he picked on Michael and Julie Weissner in his home town of Lincoln, NE. Michael was the cantor of the local synagogue, and Trapp let loose on Michael with a string of nasty words over the phone. "You'll be sorry you ever moved into that house, Jew boy. The KKK is watching you, scum."

At first, the Weissners installed a security system. Then, one day, they realized that fear and intimidation from these escalating threats were consuming them. So what do you do when a racist becomes hell bent on destroying you? Well, you could try the unconventional approach of loving that individual. This became Michael Weissner's aim. He began calling Larry Trapp's house. Each time, he had to listen to a 10-minute recording on white supremacy before he could even leave a message. But Weissner kept leaving messages that were frank yet loving, telling Trapp in different ways that hatred is no way to live.

One time, Larry Trapp picked up the phone. That's when Weissner learned that he was disabled, a diabetic with both legs amputated. In a stunning offer of friendship, Michael Weissner offered to take Larry Trapp to the supermarket for groceries. Eventually--and it took awhile--Michael and Julie were permitted to pay a visit to Larry Trapp's house. They found a monster in this unkempt house stuffed with racist literature. Here was a bully in a wheelchair, with a sawed-off shotgun by his side. He had trained himself in the use of explosives.

When the couple first met Larry, Michael shook his hand and all three of them started to cry. They talked for a couple of hours. Larry asked them to take down his Nazi flag. The Weissners paid regular visits after that, delivering groceries and assisting with house

cleaning. When doctors informed Larry that he had no more than perhaps another year to live, medically speaking, the Weissners took Larry Trapp into their own home. Julie gave up her job as a physician's assistant to care for him. Larry ended up converting to Judaism. He renounced the horrors of racism. And catch this: He made a point of phoning every person he had ever harassed and apologized to them.

Ten months after moving in with the Weissners, Larry Trapp died. Some of the African-American victims of his hatred spoke fondly of him at his memorial service. Michael Weissner delivered the eulogy for this bigot-turned-family-member. And in that eulogy, Michael referred to him as "BROTHER LARRY"--two of the sweetest words Lincoln, NE, had ever heard.⁵

We are to witness to the redeeming power of God, even if it invites trouble; maybe especially if it invites trouble.

That's it. It's as simple, and as hard, as that.

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

⁵ Rev. Peter Marty; Day1.org April 10, 2016