

## **Witnesses**

**Psalm 4; Luke 24:36b-48**

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Let's begin with a couple of stories. The first takes place many years ago when I was about 23 years old, and let's just say I was a little bit more cynical than I am now. My sister had just gotten her learner's permit to drive, and being a beautiful big brother, I decided to let her drive my car to the grocery store, with me in the passenger seat. We had just finished at the store and returned to the car, when she cranked the engine, checked her mirrors carefully like a good driving student, and put the car into gear. As she slowly eased the car out of the parking space, some maniac in a very large vehicle came careening around the corner on two wheels, skidded into a parking space closest to the doors, and after briefly yelling epithets about behavior into the darkened cabin of the vehicle, a frenzied parent bolted into the grocery store. Perhaps you have encountered such moments; perhaps you have caused such moments. As we neared the car, I turned to my sister and said, "You mark my words. There's a *fish* on the back of that vehicle!" I am referring of course to the Ichthys fish that some Christians have on their vehicles. For some reason I've never fully understood, they were very popular in the town where I grew up. They became sort of ubiquitous, and they had all sorts of permutations -- the *truth fish* eating a smaller *Darwin fish*, *two big fish* with a school of fish swimming around them, and my personal favorite was the one that read simply *gefilte*. These are designed to make a statement, aren't they? There is nothing wrong with that; I don't have one on my car, but there's no reason I couldn't. What happened next though, my sister has never let me live down. I stated bluntly, "I don't know what it is, but every time you see an idiot in traffic, they have that *fish* on their car. Clearly, Christians cannot drive."

The second story is a much more recent memory. Just a few weeks ago here in Atlanta, I met a friend of mine for dinner at a Chinese restaurant near my house. We got our booth, ordered our food, and attempted to use the chopsticks correctly. While we were waiting for our food some folks came into the restaurant and took a booth a couple seats away from us. The ladies were immaculately dressed, heavily coiffed, heavily made-up, dripping with jewelry. I know appearance is not important, but I'm trying to give you picture here. As they proceeded to order, loudly, I couldn't help but notice that certain key words were conspicuously absent from their vocabulary, namely, please and thank you. When it came time to order their drinks, one of the women began quizzing the server about the wine list. The server was a very young woman clearly too young to drink alcohol, and she didn't know the answers. The woman said to her, "What do you mean you don't know? You do sell it don't you?" The poor treatment of their server culminated with a curtly stated, "Well just give me a margarita then." And then they started to talk about their church.

My friend could see them; they were behind me. An expression of horror came to his face as he said, "Oh no. They are members of Name-Witheld-to-Protect-the-

Innocent Presbyterian Church. Now isn't that your brand of Presbyterianism?"

"No," I said, "decidedly not."

So our quick object lesson to be gained from a couple of snapshots is that the behavioral pattern of Christians is clearly they can't drive, and they are rude.

Now what was that Jesus said about witnesses?

I read an article this past week about the rise of atheism in the United States. One of the things the church should bear in mind, anytime we talk about atheism, before we begin our pontifications, if we will listen to our atheist friends and relatives carefully, they will generally tell us exactly which version of God it is that they are rejecting. And we may quickly find that the version of God that they are rejecting is a version of God we never met, a version of God that frankly needs rejection. The church should pay attention to people when they reject a caricature of God. You see, there's no question that the institutional, mainline church is shrinking. Now Morningside is not, and I have a hunch that our growth is probably as closely tied to the gods that we have patently rejected as it is perhaps to the God whom we proclaim.

Listen to what the authors said about why people are leaving religion. They wrote, "It is 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 the conservatives became more zealous. The dropouts were turned off by church's 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."<sup>1</sup>

What was it that Jesus said about witnesses again? Every once in awhile, I will hear something from someone about Islamic fundamentalism. Someone will offer the counter that if moderate, peace-loving Muslims would just repudiate the behavior of the radical sectarians that would go miles toward correcting misperceptions in the world about all Muslims. Well according to the article, Christians need to do the same.

What I mean is nothing more than this: Jesus said he needed witnesses. And I understand; it is not realistic to point out to rude restaurant-goers that their behavior makes a mockery of their Savior. And there's little to be gained by tracking down a discourteous driver to the dairy aisle in the grocery store. But there is perhaps something to be learned here for ourselves, to be remembered and to be lived.

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<sup>1</sup> The Week, April 20, 2012. P11

You see, over the past few weeks we have been talking about discipleship. Through the season of Lent, before Easter, we considered what claims our faith in Jesus Christ might exercise on our lives. And for the most part, I think we've really sort of stuck with a macro-view. You know -- taking on a new discipline during Lent, giving some thought to the ways in which we support the work of Jesus Christ in the world -- the nuts and bolts ways that Jesus' followers make it clear to those whom we encounter in our lives -- who our Savior is.

But perhaps now it's time to take a micro-view. Perhaps we are as well served to consider the almost imperceptible ways that our faith life is lived and that it shapes us, or doesn't shape us. It's good to take a moment and turn our attention inward at our own lives, our general way of being in the world, because either through our lives we are contributing to the communion of the world or we are contributing to its breakdown. It's really what attitudes, and tone of voice, and the almost imperceptible ways we present ourselves. They either contribute to the communion of the world, or we contribute to its breakdown. It's really a pretty simple idea, and I know I'm presenting it in terms of very black and very white. But I believe it's the truth: that we are either working for the up-building of community or in the absence of that, we are contributing to the destruction of community -- the vandalism of what God would have. I get it though, that as a black-and-white claim it can be a very difficult claim with which to live. It's basically the idea that there are few, or no irrelevant actions. Nothing we do is completely value-neutral. Now, objects and tools, such as money and time -- they can be value-neutral. But actions are not, whether we like it or not. We are either doing the one or we are doing the other. So, if we contribute to incivility of public discourse through our words, our attitudes, even our Facebook profiles, or our Twitter accountants if we have them, we're either doing the one, or we're doing the other. Either we are working to build up community, or we're tearing it down, by the absence of our actions.

Ah, it's a big job. But Jesus did say he needed some witnesses! Now realistically, I get it. We are not all going to be nice all of the time.

I think of myself as basically a really nice guy, but there are some things that can just about drive me around the bend. Last Monday, I was in the security line at O'Hare Airport. There was a fellow going through ahead of me, who was trying to carry through multiple packages of aluminum foil, canned tuna and strawberry preserves. It was as if he wanted the TSA to take him down. I confess my attitude was not good. I thought such thoughts, to borrow a line from Anne Lamotte, "what would make Jesus want to drink gin straight from the cat dish." It was not a good moment.

It reminded me of a congregant that I had in Indianapolis. He is deceased now, and I don't think he'd mind me telling you this story. He was a friend, but also a crank and a curmudgeon. I don't think I ever heard one good thing come out of his mouth. He was difficult and cantankerous, asthmatic, rheumatic, phlegmatic.

He didn't care who knew it, either. When I was finally nearing my breaking point with him one day, my boss said to me, "Well then just say something to him about it if it bothers you so much."

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

His reply was really where I came around on him. He said, "Oh, you should hear what I'm suppressing! If I weren't a Christian I could really cut loose now!" I suppose some of us constitutionally can only hope not to do too much damage to community!

But for the rest of us, Jesus said he needs a witness. So whether you're wearing an Ichthys fish or talking about your church, you see, you're a witness every single second of every single day. You're a witness in the Starbuck's drive-through. You're a witness on the tarmac. You are a witness in your day care. You are a witness in the high school. And you're a witness in the assisted living facility, because attitudes matter. Words matter. Feelings matter. Body language matters. It's all part of the witness.

It's a little bit overwhelming, to be perfectly honest. And yet you said you'd do it again. You promised Emma that you'd do it. What were you thinking?

I know what I was thinking, and maybe we share this thought. Maybe you were thinking about the scars on Jesus' hands and feet, the ones that the doubters needed to see in order to come to believe. I was thinking that sometimes we need to see those marks in his hands and side to be reminded of just exactly what sorts of witnesses Jesus needs. To be reminded that when it comes to eye witness, when comes to our lives, absolutely everything we do has value. Maybe all the doubters need to see the scars on Jesus' hands and side, even now just as they did then.

That's why everything matters, because it's the scars to which we are the witnesses. Remembering that can change our outlook. Maybe when we see Jesus' hands and feet and side and think about them, it might just reshape how we think about the world and might indeed reshape how we think about each other. And of course as always, it is useful to know what sort of God the folks we encounter are rejecting.

The thing about those opening illustrations was that of course they were absolutely dripping with judgment on my part. I know that, and perhaps the judgment needs to be turned as much inward as outward. Perhaps we need to take a close look at how we live our lives, all of us. I don't think this congregation is a crowd of judgmental people. Quite the opposite! But every once in awhile, we need to take a little bit of judgment. It is not a bad word; judgmentalism is bad, but judgment -- thinking about things. Take a little of that judgment and turn it

inward. Think about our lives and the way we live, whether we are building up community or tearing down community, what we say and what we do. We can take a stand in terms of building up the people that Christ died to save alongside us, or whether perhaps we are tearing down the people that Christ died to save alongside us. I'm pretty sure that at the end of the day, when God's way is just a little bit clearer for us, when we catch a glimpse of that kingdom that Jesus preached and talk about, and God says even now we're to strive to live in, when we see what it looks like, we're probably going to be at least a little bit surprised.

I guess in the end though, the only point I'm trying to make is that in order to be decent witnesses, we have to start by being decent people, all the time, all the time.

So be kind. Give others the benefit of the doubt. Be grateful and say please and thank you. And when you hurt someone say you're sorry. Choose words that heal not hurt. Drive courteously. Know that you are loved and love others.

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