

“Can I Get a Witness?”  
March 10, 2019

Acts 1:6-14

It’s not always clear in the pulpit whether the preacher and the congregation are in sync. I can see and hear things happening from up here...expressions on faces, shuffling bulletins, checking cell phones, and occasional eyes getting heavy and heads nodding off. But I don’t always know whether people are engaged with my sermon or whether they are thinking about their grocery list or the upcoming UConn game or what they might eat for lunch.

Although we have periodic louder moments, Wapping Community Church stands firm in its reserved, New England, congregational church roots. For the most part, this sanctuary is fairly quiet when I’m preaching. If we were in a different ecclesial tradition, however, I wouldn’t have to think twice about people being tuned in to what I’m saying. Because all of you would find a way to tell me through spontaneous vocal expressions in the middle of my sermon.

I actually have a favorite mid-sermon interchange between preacher and congregation. I’ve never voiced it myself, but I’ve heard it in a number of other church settings. When the preacher wants to check in with the people in the pews, he or she will pause somewhere in the sermon, or right in the middle of a particular point or illustration, and ask, “Can I get a witness?”

If you’ve ever heard a preacher ask that question out loud, there are only two responses. The first, and infinitely preferable response at least for the preacher, would be some version of “amen.” “Preach it, brother.” “Tell it, sister.” Any kind of reaction along these lines lets the preacher know he or she is on track.

The other response to, “can I get a witness?” is deafening silence. No one in the pews says anything out loud and that’s not good at all. If a sermon reaches that point, the only sound the preacher can hear is the sound of his or her sermon crashing and burning inside their head.

Can I get a witness? It’s not a legal question in this context. In a church, no one is taking the stand and a sermon isn’t delivered in a courtroom. There is no judge, unless you consider the people in a congregation judge and jury. Instead, in the preaching moment, “can I get a witness” is a call for affirmation of what is being said. It’s a way for the hearer to confirm and bear witness to the truth of what they are hearing.

In the Book of Acts, Jesus’ answer to the question about getting a witness is a loud and definitive “yes.” Jesus makes it crystal clear to his disciples in this morning’s Scripture lesson, “You will be my witnesses.” There are no ifs, ands, or buts...you will be. In fact, as far as Jesus was concerned, being a “witness” was part of any comprehensive definition of what it meant to be a follower.

Notice what Jesus said to his disciples in this morning’s passage. The meaning of witness, according to Jesus, is not task oriented. It’s actually identity oriented. In other words, witnessing is about more than doing something. It’s about being something.

Jesus challenged his disciples and followers in various other audiences to have their lip service match their life service. That challenge applies to you and me as well. And in some ways, the lip service part is more difficult to pull off than the life service. A poet once wrote that he would rather see a sermon than hear one any day. In the end, you and I are often much more adept at human doings while neglecting the part about human beings. Sometimes we get so caught up in a flurry of good Christian activity that we think what we do is the sum total of our spirituality.

Still, while we're doing all that good Christian work...while we're working for peace and justice, while we're comforting the sick and the grieving, while we are shaping a better world for those who will come after us, Jesus calls us to be witnesses. To tell the story. To be present. To be in solidarity with others. To be in the moment. For example, sometimes the best thing we can do for someone in need is to simply be alongside them. Even if we don't have an answer or a solution to the need, we can bear witness to the love of God which doesn't always need to be put into words.

Who are we as persons of faith? What is your story, my story, our story? What are you and I excited and passionate about? And how do we tell others and share with others the things that are most important to us...?

This morning is the very first Sunday in the season of Lent...forty days that began on Ash Wednesday and will carry us all the way to Holy Week in the middle of April. And if any of you saw my post on our church Facebook page, I promised that something would happen in worship today that most of you, perhaps all of you, have never seen before. Even when it's snowing during worship.

In a few minutes, all of you are invited to come forward to the front of the sanctuary where you as a family, you as a couple, or you as a single person will be paid for coming to church this morning. That's right, it probably hasn't happened to you before. It may not ever happen in your lifetime again. But surprise, today is a big day here at Wapping Community Church...

I'm pretty sure I know what you are thinking. There has to be some catch, right? Churches aren't in the business of printing money. Besides, nothing is ever really free in this world anymore.

So I want to be up front with all of you and admit to you that there is a catch this morning. But it's not a bad catch. It's a good catch. Hopefully, it's a fun, creative, inspiring, faithful catch. The catch is that you have to do two things with the money you are about to receive.

In every envelope Lisa and I will give out this morning, there is a five dollar bill. A card with instructions. And a blank, colored index card. Sometime during this season of Lent and all the way through Holy Week and Easter Sunday on April 21<sup>st</sup>, I hope you will give your five dollars away. Offer your five dollars to someone in need. Donate your five dollars to a cause or

an organization you feel passionate about. Use your five dollars creatively by transforming it into something else you want to give away. At some point over the next six weeks, reach out and give your five dollars as a gift from God that will make an impact or a difference in someone's life.

Maybe you've already started thinking about what to do with your five dollars as you are sitting here listening. But part of what I hope you will do is talk with people in your family. Talk with your spouse or your partner. Talk with a friend or a neighbor. Think carefully and pray about it and wait for God to reveal to you how best to use your money.

As you can imagine there are an endless number of things you could do with five dollars. You could give your money to someone who is hungry on the side of the road as you are driving to work. You could give your five dollars to an organization that is working for peace or justice. You could buy yarn and knit a baby blanket for a baby born prematurely. You could spend five dollars at the grocery store buying the ingredients you need to bake bread to give to someone just coming home from the hospital. You could combine your five dollars with five dollars from someone else in this congregation and find a way to reach out with ten dollars.

Step one, then. Sometime during Lent or before Easter, give your five dollars away to meet a specific need you feel good about. Step two. Use the blank, colored index card in your envelope to write down what you did with your five dollars. Briefly tell the story of how or why you made your choice, what impact it made in the life of the person or persons who received it, and how the whole experience made you feel.

When you have given away your five dollars and written the story of that five dollars on your index card, I hope you will give your index card to Lisa or to me. Or you can bring it to worship with you on Sunday, April 28<sup>th</sup>, the first Sunday after Easter.

The same way we have Star Sunday after Christmas, on Sunday, April 28<sup>th</sup> we will have "Can I Get a Witness Sunday" here at Wapping Community Church. And the same way we bear witness on Star Sunday to what our star has meant to us over the previous year, on April 28<sup>th</sup> we will take time in worship to "witness" to one another about what we did with our five dollars. While we're at it, we will gather all our colored index cards with their stories on them and display them together as our collective, church witness somewhere in this building...

I said early on in this sermon that I've never voiced one particular question in any of my sermons before. But there is a first time for everything and today feels like a good day to give it a shot.

So people of Wapping Community Church, "can I get a witness?" Let the church say "Amen."

As we sing "This Little Light of Mine," I invite you to come forward and pick up your five dollar envelope...