

## “THE POWER OF A SIMPLE WITNESS”

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In our text from Acts of the Apostles, Jesus is ready to ascend to the realm from which he was sent to us. He has shared 50 days of Easter resurrection glow with his disciples. Now he is ready to galvanize his scattered, cringing, fearful faithful. Before ascending, Jesus stirs a movement that quickly spreads to the far corners of the earth. Earlier, Jesus had commanded them “to love one another.” He had also commanded them to, “Go, make disciples.” But he has a last word for them before ascending on high. We all know to listen closely to someone’s last words. They matter. They have weight. They cut to the chase. They get to the essence.

Jesus describes our role after him: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you (*that is next week, Pentecost Sunday*) and you’ll be my *witnesses* in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” He wants us as his *witnesses*. All right. How does that play out in our own time?

I stand at a community fund raiser, and someone recognizes me as the pastor of the Congregational church. She draws near with a glass of chardonnay in one hand and a shrimp puff pastry in the other. “I’ve wanted meet you, Reverend,” she opens. “I don’t really think of myself as religious,” she intones, “but I’m a *very* spiritual person.” “Oh really,” I smile. “Say a little about what you mean by that.”

“Well, I’m talking about God, or whatever you like to call your higher power. Religious rituals and institutions are nice for some, but they don’t mean much to me. I guess I’m *beyond* that. For me the important thing is to be in tune with whoever or whatever you conceive of God to be. I think whatever works for you is great.” And then she steps back expecting me to marvel at how expansively open she is.

Helen Peterson, was a wise, gracious matriarch of First Congregational Church, Columbus, which I served. Thirty years ago, she took me by the sleeve, looked me in the eye, and said, “Dale, you can be so open-minded your brains fall out.”

This cocktail party encounter, a painfully modern take on faith, is a case in point. Her message to me was religion is a vague but deep feeling arising out of you. Religion is something that you create for yourself. All faith is really self-invented. There is nothing that happened “out there” to talk about; it all wells up right *here*. Religion isn’t about describing “God” but really only a feeling, an attitude, in here. Then this faceless lady—whom I see everywhere—expects me to be impressed.

Do you want to know how impressed I am? All right. Let’s say I am a pilot and you are on my flight. In lieu of the flight attendant’s little speech about the trays and the full upright position of the seat, I emerge from the cockpit to address my passengers. I take the hand-held microphone. “I am Dale Rosenberger, your pilot today. And I just want you to know I’ve arrived at a place where I’m beyond

checklists, flight patterns, aeronautics, and all of that boring pre-flight protocol. On our flight today I expect to reinvent all of that by finding my inner pilot, in *here*. I want to fully own this flight, to make it all mine, to fly in way authentic to myself." Would that impress you? Or would you grab your bag and force that door open?

It amazes me how folks say things to me as a pastor about self-inventing religion, parading them as clever, advanced or cutting edge. But if similar things were said to them about a surgeon self-inventing cutting or an accountant self-inventing counting or an architect self-inventing measuring—"let's just bypass the externals and look deep within our hearts"—we'd call them wacky. We wouldn't hire them.

Jesus said, "You shall be my witnesses." That differs from what the lady's saying. A witness observes an event, say, an accident. I go to court. In court, I take an oath to speak only of *actual* things. They don't want self-invented things. "Would you tell the court, Mr. Rosenberger, what you saw at 10 am on November 21<sup>st</sup>?"

"Well, I got up early that morning, because I was too tired to sleep..." "*Ahem*," the judge clears his throat. "Let's just stick to the event. What did you *observe*, Mr. Rosenberger?" "OK, well, I got in my car, and drove up Route 7, and my power steering belt was making a sound..." "*Cough*. Please tell the court what you saw *about the case*..." "Oh, all right. I stopped at the Citgo station, because they have cheap gas. And their breath mints are always fresh..." The judge says, "We don't care about any of that—your feelings that night, your fear of breaking down. All this court cares about is you describing what you saw and heard on the matter before us. Anything else, Mr. Rosenberger, and I'll find you in contempt of court."

Jesus Christ is not a figment of our imagination. He is not a feeling. He is a real person who has taken being alive to whole new places—literally and figuratively. Jesus also made some startling, distinctive claims; some specific, vast promises.

"Mr. Rosenberger, do you care to make any comments as to Jesus' claims and promises today?" Sure, I would. That is my job. Not to give you my pet opinions. Not to entertain or amuse by telling you cute stories to give you a bright attitude. Not to give you 10 steps for greater self-fulfillment and coping with today's world. My calling is to witness to the true and living God in Jesus' death and resurrection. That's your calling as well. As Joe Friday said in *Dragnet*, "Just the facts, please."

A witness witnesses something and then tells the world what he has witnessed. Simple, eh? A witness describes actual events around a case being made. The risen Christ, after defeating death at Easter, directs us to serve as his *witnesses*.

As Jesus charges all of us—not just clergy—to be his witnesses, it becomes exceedingly clear the Christian faith is not something we came up with. Rather, it's something that came to us, in one time or place, one shape or another. It's something that happened to us, something we encountered, something deeply transforming or altering the direction of our life. Can we give an account of that?

We witness to how the gospel has changed the world and how has changed us, the outer facts of the church and beyond, or the inner facts of our transformation. Jesus Christ is not the sum total of our cherished fantasies about the divine. He is the God who came to us in human flesh, and then who came back to us when *not one single person expected it*. Quite a story. No wonder he needs witnesses.

Jesus Christ is a God so different from our ideas about God, the God we would have invented if we wrote the big tale of God rescuing us from ourselves, it would be impossible to conjure him. It is all incredible. No wonder he needs witnesses.

Notice also, to be a witness, not need to be a riveting speaker, with masterful language and a distinctive style. They can even get in the way. All you need is to testify to what you've heard and seen as truest and most essential things in life. This is how Christians get made: one ordinary man telling another what occurred. And that we gather like this today visibly shows the fulfillment of Jesus' promise. That we actively receive these elements that embody his story speaks volumes.

Late in her life, the great Catholic social worker, Dorothy Day, once observed, "If I have achieved anything in my life, it is because I have not been embarrassed to talk about God." I wish we were less embarrassed, more willing and open to speak not only with our many actions, like the Food First offerings. Like our Neighbor Link experience a week ago. Like feeding the hungry in Norwalk. But also speaking with our tongues to our children, our friends and the searching, about what matters most to us, about the truth we place at the center of our lives.

For great power for good to transform arises from our simple, authentic witness. Amen.