

“Testimony”

Acts 11:1-18, John 13:31-35

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“When we say we believe in God, we are proclaiming our testimony, our story of love above all”

I think that one of my favorite stories is one that is related by the Nobel Prize winner Elie Weisel about how God rescued the Jews in times of trouble in the Middle ages. In those days when the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem-Tov saw misfortune coming, he knew how to avert it. The rabbi would go to a certain place in the great forest to meditate. There he would light a special fire, say a particular prayer, and a miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted. However, years past and the rabbi died, but the time came when misfortune troubled the Jewish community again. The rabbi's disciple, Rabbi Magrid of Mezritch went to the same special place in the forest to interced with heaven and he called out, “Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire but I am still able to say the prayer,” and so he did and the miracle was accomplished again. Still later Rabbi Moshe-Leib of Sasov, in order to save his people once more, went into the forest but couldn't find the special place and so he said, “O Lord our God, I no longer know how to light the fire and I cannot find the right place, but I still know the prayer and I hope it is sufficient.” And it was, the miracle happened and misfortune was averted once again. But once more that rabbi died and when problems threatened the community again, it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn to intercede for the people. Sitting in his armchair, he spoke to God, “I am unable to light the fire, and I can't find the right place in the forest, and I don't know the words of the prayer. All I can do is tell you the story.” And God smiled, because more than anything else, God loves a good story.¹

There is truth there, because it is often stories that change lives. This is a truth that Peter stumbles upon

¹ Weisel, Elie

in our story from Acts. Peter has discovered that it is not just the Jews to whom the Holy Spirit has come, but also to Gentiles. As they receive the good news about Jesus the Holy Spirit comes upon them in the same way that he came upon the disciples at Pentecost. So how to convince the other church leaders of that as well? Well, we could have a debate. We could each bring up our theological points and biblical references, one arguing that the Spirit of God comes to all people while the other argues the primacy of God's covenant with the Jews. Think anyone would change their minds? Do debates change minds? Not often, but stories do. "Let me tell you about what happened to me . . ."

In the old way of talking about it, that's called "testimony." Let me tell you about what happened to me. We usually only hear about testimony in court, when a witness is called in to give evidence of what he or she knows, call to tell about what they have seen, called to tell what happened to them. We don't talk about testimony or witnessing in the church any more, because, well . . . because we're Presbyterian, and Presbyterians don't do stuff like that do we. We're more rational, more intellectual, more scholarly. If someone wants to learn about God we can point them to the right book or figure out what class they should take. Besides most of our family and friends already have a church and so they don't need to hear from us, they already have their own experiences of God. Or they are part of that growing community of the "spiritual but not religious," and so they don't want to hear from us, they've already got God figured out that they can experience him in the sunset or the smile of a baby or on the golf course.

The Congregationalist pastor and author, Lillian Daniel says, "I think we do this for one another all the time, we mad people of faith. We interact with those who will not step foot in the institution we love. We make friends with non-believers who claim that we are crazy. I think everybody knows someone . . ., someone who would love what the church is about if they came; but for complicated reasons, usually from their own personal history with some other church, they can't bring themselves to enter a church building. But they talk to their friends about it, they debate it, they wonder intellectually

what it all means. And then they experience some moment of utter crisis, and they turn to you and ask for some kind of spiritual help, and you find yourself called into the eye of the tornado. And, suddenly, you have become for them the church, called to play a role greater than the role of friend, or family member or colleague.”²

So often we think our “testimony” isn't really needed, right? We are Presbyterians, after all. We don't witness or evangelize or share our testimony. We don't need to do that. Except sometimes. Except when you are sitting with your nephew who has lost both his parents and feels very alone in the world, and he says to you, “You believe in heaven, don't you?” Except when you are holding the hand of your childhood friend whose body is filled with cancer and is sick of all the chemotherapy and she says to you, “You go to church, right? I don't understand how God can love this.” Except when your son has lost his job, has no one to love in his life, doesn't know where to go now, and over the phone he says, “I know you believe in God, but how can I in the midst of all of this?” This is the time when as they say, being spiritual but not religious is not enough.³

What do you say? They need you to say something. But arguing with them isn't going to be helpful. Debating isn't what they need. A bunch of intellectual reasons won't help. What they need is a story. They need testimony. They need your testimony. How do you experience God? Where did God touch you? Why is it that you go to church, and why do you think God wants you to? What happened to you? That's testimony.

That's scary, right? These friends, these loved ones don't go to church, so all of a sudden *you* are church for them. Really scary. How can I be church? How can I be a representative of the people of God to this person? Well, like it or not, we are. And Jesus warns us about that in his words to the disciples. “By this they will know that you are my disciples.” By what? How will they know? Only one way, by love. They will know if we love each other. In the best of worlds, that's our testimony,

² Daniel, Lillian.

³ Daniel, Lillian. *When Being Spiritual But Not Religious Is Not Enough*.

that's the story we have to tell. I go to church because it is at church that I feel enveloped in the love of God, because I know that all around me are people that know me and love me anyway. I believe in heaven because when I lost someone I loved, others held me up in their prayers, embraced me so I could cry on their shoulders and helped me to believe that love is stronger than death and that's heaven. I believe in God because once when I was down and out, God's people were there to lift me up, because when I had done something terrible, God's people were there ready to forgive me; because one time when I had a real difficult time, I wasn't alone—God had people there who were ready to walk with me. And all this happens not because people like me—that doesn't have anything to do with it, they love me. They love me because they have found that God loves them. That's how I know, that's why I believe, because of love.

That's our testimony, that's our story. If you don't have that story, if you haven't known that you are loved by the church, by us, then we have failed. Forgive us. We're imperfect in our loving, but we have known God's love. And our testimony is that we live in God's love. That's the story we can tell.

God made us because he loves stories. And the story of love is the best one of all.