

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost • July 7, 2013

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Luke 10:1-20

“Signs of the Church: Witness”

We have a problem.

The problem isn't a difficulty in sharing something you're excited about. I, for one, would gladly tell you about a new place to eat when I've tried it. I'd let you know where this place is and what kind of food they've got – and if it's any good. If I know you and what you like, or even what you might possibly appreciate, I'd talk about particular items on the menu and recommend that you go there to experience it yourself. And when a place does something particularly well, like a restaurant that delivers really good service, I'd make sure to point that out. I enjoy being able to connect people with places or things that I think they'd get a charge out of, or from which they'd benefit. Generally speaking, we do like to tell someone else when there's something out there that's exciting or special or beneficial in order that they experience it, too. And the more we know about it, the more familiar we are with it, the better we're able to tell about it. We've got something that is all that, but we don't often share it. That's a problem.

We have a problem, you and I both, and it doesn't seem to be getting any better as time has gone on. It seems like we're not generally all that good at communicating what it means to be the Christian Church in this day and age. If someone were to ask you directly, how much of a challenge would it be for you to say what it means to be a Christian? What is being a Christian – a part of the capital “C” Church – really all about?

It's not just acknowledging that Jesus is the Son of God. Even the demons we heard about earlier in Luke's Gospel account knew that. Jesus is 100% God and 100% human; however, he is also our Savior. Christians confess that Jesus is the deliverer that God promised to send. He is the Messiah, the Christ who came to live the perfect life that you and I are unable to live. He came to offer himself up on the cross to take our place before God the Father as the once-for-all sacrifice that would reconnect humanity with our Creator. He came to take up his life again after death to show that the ultimate power of death has been broken and we can have hope. But being the Church isn't just about what we believe.

It's not just living a life that follows God's design. God gave His people the Ten Commandments after He brought the Hebrew nation out of slavery in Egypt through the water of the Red Sea. Most religions offer moral codes and instructions on how you're supposed to live. But the Ten Commandments aren't an instruction manual on how to make things right with God; rather, they show what it means to be people that God has called to be His own. Confronted by these perfect standards, the people of the Church realize how far we've fallen short and come to God the Father asking His forgiveness through Jesus, God the Son. And the Holy Spirit continually prompts us to living that increasingly values and conforms to God's design for life and the identity as His people that He has called us to reflect. But being the Church isn't just about how you live.

Communicating what it means to be a Christian, being the Church for which Jesus lived and died and rose again, means being a witness. Our thoughts, speech, and actions are representing the one who sends us. When our understanding and follow-up on what it means to be Christians is too limited, we fall short and misrepresent our Lord. So what witness are we giving to the world around us? What is witness that does what it is meant to do?

Imagine that you're working in a job that you can't stand, but you don't have the ability to find employment somewhere else. It seems like the big boss is downright evil, only interested in short-term goals and caring nothing for the company's employees. You've been there for so long, it's hard to remember why you started in the first place. Early on, the work didn't sound so bad, but it became the mind- and soul- crushing drudgery that you live with every day. The starting pay seemed acceptable, but you only looked at the contract's hiring bonus and didn't read the fine print. At first, it seemed like the other people that worked there weren't so bad, yet they're just as miserable in their jobs as you are in yours. When it comes down to it, they're stuck and you're stuck doing the same unrewarding work every day, for what looks like the rest of forever. But one day, someone new shows up at your workplace, looking specifically for you. He tells you why he's come: his employer has hired you. They've bought out your existing contract and provided a benefit package that would put Google's to shame. This new work would be challenging and very different from what you've been doing, but the employer offers great on-the-job training. You've

seen people that work there, and most of them seem to have a shared sense of purpose in their labor, even when it's hard. What's more, this guy tells you that his company's chief executive heard about you and requested you by name. Now, you don't know how this amazing company found you, or why they'd want you to make you a part of your team. It's not like you're qualified for the work, and you hadn't even been looking! You current supervisor has overheard what this unexpected visitor has been saying. They come over and tell you – loudly – that this new offer's too good to be true, that you should stay right where you're at. This messenger, though lets you know that they're ready for you to start right away. He starts walking you out to the exit, handing you an employment contract that his company's big boss has personally signed. As you step outside your workplace, out from the job that's felt like a prison for so long, he adds the most unbelievable detail: his employer is hiring, and you're welcome to extend an offer of employment to your former coworkers, too. So what will you do? Will you take up this amazing new job or run back to the old one? Will you return to the supervisor who'd told you that no one else would ever want to hire you? Or will you share your good news with the people who are as stuck as you'd been? Will you be a messenger – a witness?

Jesus sent seventy-two disciples out as witnesses to go before him to the towns and villages that he would soon visit. He sent them into a hostile environment, into enemy territory, to people who might not receive them. Jesus even says that he is sending them as “lambs in the midst of wolves.” But their mission is an urgent one, and they do not go empty-handed. They go as representatives of the one who is sending them. They carry the peace that Jesus brings, the peace that comes as the kingdom of God breaks in to our hostile world. That peace is a divine gift: these disciples, Jesus' witnesses, are bearers of blessing. **Going, they do what Jesus does.** They heal the sick and proclaim God's peace and presence among the people. When they return, these disciples marvel at what the power of Jesus' name is accomplishing. But the Lord points them to the real victory that God is working: Satan is falling from heaven and souls are being set free from bondage. God overcomes the hostile world, and Jesus rejoices in the witnesses who carry the good news of freedom that victory brings.

You and I regularly fall short as witnesses. We do a pretty poor job of representing the One who sends us. But God's peace is still here for us both. Even in a world that is openly hostile to Jesus and his Church, God still continues to send us out. People might not receive you. But going, you are still a bearer of blessing. As a witness, you are sent to carry the message that God is calling the people you encounter by name. God wants them to be with Him, bringing them out from the mind- and soul-crushing life that Satan says is the only thing that's real. **Witness does what Jesus does,** bringing God's peace, power, and presence to bear in a world that needs the benefits that he offers.

Walking together in this season of Pentecost, we'll be looking to God's word to learn more about what it means to *be* the Church. At its core, the Church is always the body of Christ, the people that the Holy Spirit has called together and sustains in living the life that Jesus gives us: life reconnected and reconciled with our heavenly Father. In each of the summer weekends ahead we'll highlight one of the **signs of the Church**, those actions and attitudes that speak to who we are and who we are meant to be as the body of Christ, in the world but not of the world.

Witness is a sign of the Church because it is central to who we are as Christians. You and I represent Jesus together because he makes it possible. As people that he has called by name, we have a message to share: The kingdom of God has come near. As Jesus' witnesses, carry that good news – the news of peace that comes through him – into your world today. Peace be with you!

Amen.