

Testimony

I John 5:9-13

Sunday, May 24, 2009

The Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor

Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church

I John 5:9-13

If we receive human testimony, the testimony of God is greater; for this is the testimony of God that he has testified to his Son.

Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts. Those who do not believe in God have made him a liar by not believing in the testimony that God has given concerning his Son. And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.

Prayer.

If I asked for volunteers

To stand, face the congregation,

And share your testimony,

I can only imagine what kinds of thoughts would speed through your mind.

Some might think: "Holy cats, Pastor Todd has gone off the deep end!"

As if testimony was some type of symptom for mental illness.

Others might think: "Oh, my gracious! Pastor Todd has gone off and joined the fundamentalists,

The evangelicals, the Christian right; or Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority."

And depending on your own personal theology,

That might be comforting or (more likely) threatening.

Some might fear being called on: "Please God, let it be anyone but me!"

Others might be looking for the nearest exit.

Yet, others might associate testimony with knocking on doors;

What Jehovah Witnesses do, or Mormons, or Bible Baptist.

My guess is that if I asked for volunteers to share their testimony

That it would be negatively received by about 90% of the congregation

And that I'd be asking the Bishop for a change of appointment.

Well, have no fear.

I'm not asking for anyone to give a personal testimony.

Neither am I asking for a change in appointment.

However, I share these thoughts with you

To obtain some sense of how negative we've become

(and when I say "we," I mean traditional, mainline protestant, United Methodists)

Towards bearing testimony

As a healthy characteristic of personal faith.

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It is as if we seceded the high ground of testimony
 To the religious right
 Without saying a word;
 Without so much as putting up any resistance at all.

Bearing testimony is entirely Biblical.
 It is taught by example and it is one of Jesus' commands.
 So why wouldn't we want to defend our right to practice this aspect of personal piety?

We've been following first John, low these past six weeks of Easter.
 We have learned that this is a late first or early second century sermon
 Written by someone from the community of faith
 That had earlier surrounded and supported the apostle John.
 The apostle was dead, but the community lived on.
 The earlier document,
 The Gospel of John,
 Had been completed and was circulating among early Christian communities,
 Much like the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke had already been circulating.
 There are certainly clues that can be found within John
 That clearly point to the authors influence by one of the other Gospels.
 However, there is much of John that just doesn't match up.
 It is clear that Matthew and Luke very closely parallel the earlier Gospel of Mark.
 But, the Gospel of John is like the odd man out.
 There are at work in the Gospel of John other forces, other beliefs, other memories of the life,
 passion, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ.
 Because the Gospel of John was so different, so unique, there was great division amongst
 believers from John's community about what exactly was meant by his major themes.
 The Epistle of First John is commentary on the Gospel of John;
 An attempt to clarify,
 To clear up in a single sermon,
 The divisive issues that were tearing the community into pieces.
 It was hard enough to be practicing your faith underground and in fear of your own life.
 It was especially hard when everyone in the community wasn't on the same page and had
 divergent, conflicting interpretations of the apostle's words.

In previous weeks,
 We've learned that the lesson from First John addresses Christian love;
 The love that we are given from God,
 How we are expected to share that love with one another,
 And with the entire world.
 We learned about the greatest gift of love,
 God giving us his own Son,
 That he might atone for our sins;

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Take our sins and die on the cross,
 That by his sacrifice of love,
 We have our sins wiped clean
 As if they never happened.
 First John made the point that God's love
 Won victory over the grave for Jesus,
 And gives us the gift of eternal life,
 Starting right here right now.
 Don't wait to die to receive the judgment, and possible salvation.
 Begin right now with your belief that Jesus is your Lord and Savior,
 And salvation begins immediately.

Today's concluding passage of First John
 Completes the book with a commentary on testimony.
 This theme is central to our Fourth Gospel:¹

- At the beginning of the Gospel, John the Baptist bears witness to Jesus (John 1:7, 8, 15, 32).
- Jesus bears witness to himself and the Father bears witness to him (John 5:31, 32; 8:18).
- The beloved disciple bears witness to the events of crucifixion and resurrection (John 19:35; 21:24).
- After Jesus' death and return to the Father, the Paraclete will bear witness to the truth of the gospel. (John 15:26)
- Finally — implicitly at least — the Gospel itself becomes a witness whose testimony is true and fully to be believed (John 20:31).

Testimony had always come from
 John the Baptist,
 The disciples,
 From Jesus,
 From the Holy Spirit
 And from the Gospel itself.
 Today we are told that,
 Like love,
 Testimony first comes from God.
 Testimony first comes from God;
 And that is greater than anything humankind might add.
 "The testimony of God is greater," First John preaches,
 Than human testimony;
 "For this is the testimony of God,

¹ Commentary on Second Reading by David Bartlett
 (as found at: http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=5/24/2009#)

That he testified to his Son.”
 God’s own act of sending us his Son
 Is a testimony of his love and grace for us.
 If you don’t believe in God’s testimony,
 You are calling God a liar,
 You are turning your back on God’s love,
 And you are refusing to receive God’s grace.
 Believe in Jesus,
 That he can forgive your sins,
And your sins are forgiven.
 Believe in Jesus
 That by his resurrection
 You have received eternal life,
And you will have eternal life.

Testimony and belief are compliments of one another.
 Have one, and the other comes naturally.
 A part of John Wesley’s awakening
 Came when his Moravian mentor
 Told him,
 “John,
 preach faith until you have it;
 Once you have it,
 you will be able to preach faith!”

Eternal life,
 Life abundant,
 Is life lived in God’s son.
 Life abundant
 May mean poverty,
 Or it may mean wealthy affluence.
 Life abundant
 May mean a day-in, day-out struggle for survival
 Or it may mean everything tends to be easy and to go your way.
 Abundance has nothing to do with the hand we are dealt, how much we have, or how well off
 we are.
 Abundant life has everything to do with inviting Jesus to abide within,
 To take up residence in your life;
 And to abide in Jesus,
 To take up residence in his life.
 Learn his ways,
 Listen to his words,
 Follow his example;

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That's what it means to abide in Jesus.
Believe in him and welcome him into every nook-and-cranny in your earthly existence;
That's what it means to have Jesus abide in you.
When we abide in Jesus
Testimony becomes second nature.
It becomes our every expression
Of our Savior's love and grace
That has become the fiber of our soul.

It is our every right and responsibility to choose;
To whose testimony shall we heed?
To the lesser testimony of the world
And, in essence, calling God a liar,
And accept the fate of death?
Or will we listen to the greater testimony of God
And embrace life,
Life abundant,
Life lived in Jesus?
Amen.

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