

**Acts of Faith:
Testimony**

“When I decided to speak, I had a lot to say and many ways in which to say what I had to say.” These are the words of acclaimed poet and author Maya Angelou. At age eight, while living with her mother, Angelou was sexually abused by her mother's boyfriend. She reported it to her brother, who told the rest of their family. The man was found guilty, but only jailed for one day. Four days after his release, he was found kicked to death. Maya felt responsible: "I thought, my voice killed him; I killed that man, because I told his name." And so, "I stopped talking for five years," she said. While of course 8 year old Maya's naming of her attacker did not kill him, she was right about the power the spoken word can have to affect those around us and our world. Thank God she found her voice again, because her life of words, poetry and prose, has been strong testimony to this truth. In her words: "To show you how out of evil there can come good, in those five years I read every book in the black school library. I read all the books I could get from the white school library. I memorized James Weldon Johnson and Langston Hughes. I memorized Shakespeare, whole plays, fifty sonnets. I memorized Edgar Allen Poe, all the poetry; never having heard it, I memorized it. I had Longfellow, I had Guy de Maupassant, Balzac, Rudyard Kipling. I mean, it was a catholic kind of reading and catholic kind of storing. [And so] When I decided to speak, I had a lot to say and many ways in which to say what I had to say."¹

¹From PBS videotape Facing Evil, with Bill Moyers, KERA, Dallas-Fort Worth, Denton, and Public Affairs Television, 1988; Pacific Arts Publishing, 50 N. La Cienega Blvd., Beverly Hills, CA 90211. Found in Robert Dykstra, *Discovering a Sermon* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001), 94.

Testimony is a word with many connotations. In the law, testimony is a form of evidence that is obtained from a witness who makes a solemn statement or declaration of fact. In a non legal sense, testimony is a statement of personal belief or experience. It was just a few weeks ago that I learned that a “Last Will and Testament” is not only a legal document stating what will happen to our property after we die, but the Testament is reference to a Testament of faith that a person may wish to leave.

Mainline churches such as ours, long ago lost their fervor for the Christian practice of testimony. Many evangelical, charismatic and fundamentalist churches have held on to the practice and branded it their own. But, as we see in the book of Acts, the practice of testimony, of telling stories that locate God’s work in our lives and sharing those stories as a means of connecting to others and building faith, is fundamental to our Christian traditions. Author Diana Butler Bass writes, “the church itself started with the apostle Peter’s testimony on the day of Pentecost...From that point onward, famous disciples, like Peter and Paul, and regular converts and believers spread the good news of Christian faith...through their testimony. Their stories of experiencing God were...powerful, [and] personally transformative.”²

In today’s passage Peter and John are entering the temple when they run into a disabled man asking for alms. In response to the man’s plea for assistance, Peter suggests that he has something more valuable than money to offer the man, their testimony of faith. At this the man, lame from birth, gets up and starts jumping around, praising God. When people see that this man is healed, they turn their amazement to Peter and John, but they do not accept the praises of the crowds. Instead, they remind them all of a story they already know.

² *Christianity for the Rest of Us* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2006) 134.

One of the keys to understanding this story is to remember that Peter and John are a part of the Jewish tradition and adhere to its customs. So, when this scene begins, they are heading to temple for the hour of prayer. And when Peter addresses the crowd as “You Israelites,” this is not a means of separating himself from them, but reminding them of who they are. They are God’s chosen people. They are people who are special in God’s sight. They should not be surprised to see what God can do in healing this man. He then connects their rich history to the person of Jesus. He reminds them of this gentle Jewish man who had been in their midst, taught them from the scriptures, treated all he met with love. And he reminded them how they had all witnessed Jesus’ death and participated, actively or passively in bringing it about.

But remember, Peter is the disciple who denied Jesus three times. His purpose here is not to place blame, for he would be first among those to be accused, but to show the power of God to bring good out of evil. For this Jesus who had died, is alive. He appeared to Peter and the other disciples. He gave them a mission and purpose and sent them into the world. More than witnessing to the life of a good man who was martyred, the disciples’ testimony is to the power of God that is alive and at work in the world. We see this also when Peter and John refuse to take credit for what has happened. Their testimony does not point back at themselves, but to the God who raised Jesus.

Testimony should never point back to the one giving it, but always to something greater. The same thing can be said, by the way, about our stewardship. The theological basis of Christian stewardship is the individual’s need to respond to God’s goodness. It is not about our generosity or care, but God’s. It is true that the church lives on the gifts of its members, but the reason we do this is because we have faith in God’s goodness and providence. If a church is providing a place for us to experience God’s goodness and grow

in faith, it will not want for anything, because its members and friends will know the need and understand the benefit. If a church consistently has trouble in this area, perhaps the place to start is not in attempts to increase our funds, but to increase our efforts to share God's goodness with one another. Stewardship too is about so much more than the money we give; it is about our care for one another and for our planet; in short it is about all the ways we respond to God's goodness. Testimony too is about more than our words, but all the ways we witness to God's love and kindness.

I will talk more about the 23rd Psalm next Sunday, but we chose that as the theme for this year's Stewardship campaign. Notice it doesn't say anything about our giving or generosity, but it is one of the most familiar reminders of God's goodness that we know. Often times we recite it at crucial times throughout our lives. And often times at gravesides when a loved one has passed away. We do this because it reminds us of God's care for us. Whether or not you are already familiar with it, I encourage you to read it often over the next few days, weeks and months. With all that is going on in our world right now, it seems like a good time to be reminded of God's goodness. We need to remember that as important as things like the economy are, life and the chance to pursue meaning and healing in our world are the most precious gifts. Life can be hard at times, we can reach a point where the problems seem insurmountable, but life can also be filled with unexpected surprises and reasons to jump around shouting for joy.

A recent study of mainline churches that are thriving shows that one of the things they offer that many other churches don't, is the opportunity to share our testimony, to share our sense of God's work in our lives, not necessarily in religious, or churchy or theologically sophisticated language, but with the words that we have been storing up all these years. And much like Maya Angelou, who as the result of an unimaginably horrific experience, immersed herself in a literary community, when we begin to listen to others tell their stories, our vocabulary of faith will increase, as will our understanding of God's incredible goodness. The members of Session who have been involved in the *Share the Good* interviews can and will attest to the fact that there are a lot of really good, really moving, really insightful stories among us. The more we are able find ways of sharing them with one another, the more we will grow in our experience of God's goodness.

So what is your testimony? Where have you been healed? Have you ever had an overwhelming experience of God's goodness that made you jump up and down shouting? Who did you tell? How do you see God at work in your life? What is God doing for you right now? Or maybe that language is too churchy for you. How about this: What is good in your life? What do you really, truly treasure? Where do you feel most at home?...most yourself?...most alive?...most accepted?...most connected to a purpose that is greater than yourself? Even if these things or people or places have nothing to do with church or religion, have you ever considered that they might just have everything to do with God?

This is what the church needs to be about; because if it isn't, I am not sure that anything else that we do really amounts to all that much. The bottom line is that we are God's special people. We are witnesses to God's goodness. You are a witness. You are! It is time for us to speak. Many in our world need reminding of God's goodness. Now as much as ever, we need to hear each other's testimonies and find our own! Amen.