
Can I Get a Witness?

Acts 1:6-14

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on June 1, 2014 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

There are times in the preaching moment when the preacher may be unsure whether the congregation is on the same homiletical highway as him or her, whether the listening audience is following the sermon, tracking the sermon, paying attention to the sermon, is engaged with the sermon, or wishing they were still asleep at home attending Bedside Baptist Church (I hear they have a large congregation!). Some preachers become a bit concerned when there is more silence than exclamatory shouts during their sermons. Of course, this may depend on one's ecclesial tradition and spiritual socialization. But at such moments, in some sectors of the universal Church, when the preacher wants to check in with those in the pew to assure that they are with him or her, the preacher may ask, "Can I get a witness?" It is a question without multiple choice answers because it really only has one right answer: yes or amen. No preacher wants to hear someone in his or her congregation respond to that question with "you're guilty of homiletical homicide!" The question, "can I get a witness?" is not supposed to be answered like that or with silence; if it is, it could indicate the end of that sermon as it burns and crashes on the altar and the end of that pastor's job.

Can I get a witness?! No one is taking the stand and a sermon isn't in a courtroom. There is no judge unless we consider a congregation the judge and jury. It is true that the verdict may still be out on some sermons but do we really know what we're asking for when we hear "can I get a witness?" Homiletically, in the preaching moment, it is a call for affirmation of what is being said, that is, that the hearer knows that it is true and can witness to the truth being proclaimed.

Can I get a witness? According to Acts, the answer is a loud and definitive 'yes.' Jesus tells his disciples, "You will be my witnesses." There are no ifs, ands, or buts. You will be. The term "'Witness' [can be viewed as] a comprehensive definition" of what it means to be a Christian (Darrell Guder). Jesus defines the future of the church's vocation as witness. "You will be my witnesses." Of course, witness can refer to action; this biblical book is "The *Acts* of the Apostles" so it would appear that action has priority and we do see the church at work in the world in Acts.

Yet Jesus reveals that the meaning of witness is not limited to a task; it has to do with identity as well—you will *be*. To witness includes testifying to what one has seen and heard (1 John 1:1) but it is more than that. It is more than doing. It is being. "You will *be* my witnesses." Not you will do my witnesses. Our being is at stake. Our Christian identity and character. Jesus challenges his audience to have their lip service match their life service. Being may be more difficult than doing which is why one poet writes that he'd rather see a sermon than hear one any day (Edgar Guest). We may be more adept at human doings and neglect that we are human beings. We may become busy spiritual bees in a flurry of good Christian activity and become hypnotized into thinking that activity is the sum total of our spirituality when in fact, we are called to *be* witnesses—be present, be with others, be in the moment. At times the best pastoral care response to someone in need is silence and the giving of your presence. The gift of being. I hate to disagree with Hamlet—to be or not to be, that is *not* a question. We are called *to be* witnesses.

I hear Dr. Maya Angelou, who just died this past week, say, "When people show you who they are, believe them." Who are you and how is your witness of being? In other words, is your life an 'amen' to the proclamation on your lips (James Forbes)?

To be is one thing in relation to witness. To die is another. We know followers of Christ in the early church who gave their lives for the faith like the disciple Stephen who was stoned to death later in Acts. He was a martyr. He was a witness. To be witnesses, in the context of Acts, has to do with being martyrs, literally. Whether in reference to a person who is a witness, the testimony given by a witness or bearing witness, it all relates to martyrdom. A witness dies. Can I get a witness now?

No wonder we need power from the Holy Spirit to be witnesses. We need power to die. You will receive power to be my witnesses. The power to die. We receive power when the Holy Spirit descends on us. It is not power of our own creation. It is not from within but from without. It is a gift of God. This is the same Spirit that has been playing on the stage of the gospel theater of Luke and is at work in the sequel of Acts. The same Spirit that anointed Jesus to make him the Christ (3:22; 4:1, 18). The same Spirit blowing like a rushing mighty wind at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-42). This Spirit empowers us to be witnesses, giving us the power to die.

It is a power to die to the notion that it is our power and not God's. It is the power to resist the temptation to build our Christian CVs by demonstrating how much we've done in our own power for the kingdom, how much social outreach, how much fellowship, how much we are active and alive, because we are called to be witnesses and that is a holy death sentence. The power we receive from on high is not necessarily for living the Christian life but for dying the death Christ lived, living a Christian dying and death. And this requires power.

We may think that dying is a sign of weakness when in fact it takes tremendous strength to die. Think of those we honored last Monday on Memorial Day. A courageous power is needed to die. A power to trust that there is a future beyond your current address. It takes power to face death with all of its unknowns and not to be in control. It takes power to humble oneself for something greater than oneself even if it entails death on a cross. It takes power to realize that our calling as disciples should be a challenge and not a consumer-driven church on the corner of easy street and carefree court. Jesus didn't create a Christian Comfort Inn; when we follow him I can almost guarantee that we will find him in the valley of the shadow of death and we'll need power to die to face our own fears of death.

We may need power to live but you really need power to live when you know you are dying. Maya Angelou was one of the first people my family met when we arrived at Duke in 2012. She was the last person to use my office before I officially became the dean of the Chapel. On that August afternoon, my family met her in my office and took a picture with her, a picture I keep displayed today on a shelf. She was here to give her annual address to the incoming first year class which she had been doing for more than 20 years.

But something was different about her talk in 2012—it was the first time she ever spoke for this event from a wheelchair. Her health was declining. One might say she was dying. Yet in that state, she spoke about rainbows in the clouds and rainbows are very significant to my wife, Gail. I realized that in what was a quick transition to Duke, a strange land at the time, Dr. Angelou was a rainbow for us, God's sign that we were not alone on this journey. Despite her apparent physical weakness, she received power to witness to the truth. She exemplified that power is made perfect in weakness and that whenever we are weak then we are strong (2 Cor), that God's weakness is stronger than human strength (1 Cor.), that God gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless (Is 40). She was a witness.

This is a power to die and it gives strength to live in the midst of dying. You will receive power and you will be my witnesses. The power to die. To keep living and hoping and dreaming and working and enduring despite what the doctor's prognosis may be. This power is like fire shut up in human bones, ready to explode, creating the will to live.

In fact, it is dynamite within you. 'Power' in this biblical setting comes from a word that gives us the English word 'dynamite.' This power is explosive, expansive, far-reaching and stretching like wildfire. When we say in the creed, "I believe in the Holy Spirit" we are also saying, "I believe in dynamite." I believe in power. Jesus

goes up that we may go out. When the disciples “come together” they gather to eventually scatter to the ends of the earth. This is what the Spirit’s power will do in a community. When the Spirit comes down, we are led outward. The goal is really not to be together. The goal is to be a witness in the world like dynamite. “In Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Faith has feet and requires a power that will lead us to places we might have never imagined going and we would surely never go without God.

This power to die also means dying to comfort as the Spirit challenges us to go beyond our comfort zones, denominationally, racially, economically, culturally, geographically, and gender-wise. This power causes one to die to the familiar and stretches us as wide and far as the ends of the earth. Power is needed to transgress boundaries because you will be foreign and what you encounter will be foreign. It is a power to die to the self while living in the Spirit. This power is discovered in the dispersion not in the coming together because it is a power given to witness to explode our imaginations and uncover the expansive, far-reaching reality of God in a world-wide, boundary-crossing mission.

Just as Jesus ascended and rose, we too can rise above and transcend our human boundaries when receiving the power of the Spirit. Dynamite will blow up our cultural cliques. We have to die in order to be a true witness. “The church is not a club with a voluntary code for elite insiders [with] like-minded propaganda existing only to underwrite our comfort zone. [This] is no gospel at all.” (Clifton Black)

The Holy Spirit does not specialize in upholding uniformity or homogeneity. The Spirit unifies and her power leads us to embrace a holy heterogeneity. To stay together in a status quo sameness does not require a gift of the Spirit because we can do this in our own power. But dynamite, Spirit power, is necessary to embrace the beautiful differences we’ll find in the ends of the earth. This power moves us beyond ourselves to a centrifugal ministry that expands as wide as the mercy of God. It is a broad influence exploding to blow up denominational parochialism, theological enclaves, and ethnic segregational tendencies. To be witnesses to the one universal Church, a polyphonic global symphony that includes Ebenezer Baptist Church gospel and Gregorian chant, requires a power that will only come from the Spirit because who by their own volition would choose to die?

This power, unlike the recent episodes of the power of a gun’s trigger in Santa Barbara and Myrtle Beach, does not seek to control, dominate, or destroy. It does not crave or grab for power because no one in his or her right mind would play with dynamite. The power of the Spirit is not a gospel of accumulation but one of dissemination. It releases and shares the Spirit world-wide and never insists on its own way because this power is love, love unto death. The power to die.

At the day of Pentecost, this power to be witnesses breaks out like dynamite all over the world, like oil pouring out from a broken alabaster jar because this is how love acts. “Love spills its bounds”(Debra Dean Murphy), overflowing with ecumenical grace. Dr. Angelou told an interviewer in 1985 what she hoped would be written in her obituary, “What I would really like said about me is that I dared to love.”

It takes power to love. In the aftermath of the Boston Marathon bombing, no cemetery was willing to receive the remains of Tamerlan Tsarnaev, the bomber, after he was killed in a shootout with police. However, Douglas Keene, a Yale graduate, from Vermont, offered to Tsarnaev’s family to receive their son’s remains for burial on the condition that it be done, in his words, “*in memory of my mother who taught Sunday School at the Mt. Carmel Congregational Church for twenty years and taught me to ‘love thine enemy.’*” He received power to be a witness, the power to die, the power to love. Love is not just about life; it is a form of death for the lover. It is a power to die for. The communion table reveals this.

Will you dare to love and dare to die? Can I get a witness? I’m not asking the question this time. God is.