

“Called to Be Witnesses”

John 5:31-47

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When I was in seminary, my roommate and I would rush home at noon every afternoon, not so much to fix lunch for ourselves but to tune in to our favorite television program- reruns of the original Perry Mason show from the late 50's and early 60's starring Raymond Burr. We loved that show because we thought we had learned more about being a pastor watching HIM than we did from some of our classes in practical ministry which were intended to prepare us for our first pastorates. First you had Perry, who carried himself like the Senior Pastor of a great church- always calm, always so self-assured, always so understanding and in control of every situation; you never saw him panic or lose his temper. Often, he could be seen comforting a client by sympathetically holding her hand or offering some bit of sagacious advice that set the person at ease. During the epilogue of each show, he usually had a little homily that reminded us all that crime did not always pay, that truth would eventually win out in the end.

At the risk of sounding terribly sexist, we thought Della Street fulfilled the role of the perfect church secretary- both beautiful and dutiful. She was always quick to get Perry another cup of coffee or type whatever documents Perry needed at the time. Everyone knew, of course, that she was in love with Perry but Perry, ever the responsible professional, never crossed the bounds of impropriety.

Paul Drake was the quintessential Assistant Pastor, handling those assignments that Perry was often too busy to do himself. One of our favorite episodes involved the one where Perry sent Paul to investigate an underground nightclub to get some information pertaining to his case. Paul walks in with his usual natty attire--all suit and tie--while everyone else in the club is dressed in dark garb- as beatniks. After the folk singer performs her number, everybody snaps their fingers with approval. When he returns to the office afterwards, Perry asks him what he saw and Paul responds, “Perry, it was terrible. No booze, no lights, no fun- everybody just sat around in the dark hating themselves.”

Of course, our pity always went out to poor Hamilton Berger, the worst prosecutor ever to address a jury. Between 1957 and 1966, Hamilton never won a case, despite all the help he received from Lt. Tragg. It wasn't that he was incompetent but that Perry, his prime nemesis, was so far SUPERIOR. Yes, Phil and I were sure that that wise, rational, pastoral care-giver- Perry Mason, was a perfect role model for aspiring ministers such as ourselves.

Well, this morning, we have another court scene to sit in on- this one, however, is not set on a soundstage in Hollywood but in ancient Jerusalem; the prosecutor is not Hamilton Berger, but a group of religious leaders, experts in the law, who question the truthfulness of Jesus' statements; the defense attorney who also plays the role of the defendant, is not Perry Mason, but Christ himself; and finally there is US- WE'VE been asked this morning to observe the proceedings and to act as both judge and jury. We are commissioned to hear all the evidence,

weigh all the facts, and then arrive at a just verdict- that either what Jesus says about himself is TRUE or else he is a LIAR, a MADMAN, a BLASPHEMER.

Now let me set the scene: Jesus' popularity among the people was steadily growing but his relationship with the Jewish leaders had increasingly deteriorated. He had threatened the priesthood by driving the sellers of animals and the money-changers out of the Temple. He had performed miracles and healings causing the Jews to question if his power was from the devil. His controversial teachings, that he and the Father were one, appeared blasphemous. The Jews had genuine doubts about Jesus and in this scene, they ordered him to prove himself. Summoned to the witness stand, he is called upon to testify on his own behalf and authenticate his so-called ministry, to vindicate his works and teachings among the people.

On more than one occasion, Jesus reminded the Jews of one of their own laws which stated that two or more witnesses were required to confirm a truth. Jesus now appeals to that law saying, "If I alone bear witness of myself, my testimony is not true. There is another, however, who bears witness of me; and I know that the testimony which he bears of me is true." He then starts to build his case, giving account of the many witnesses who can corroborate that the things he says and does are not his own but from God. The first character witness he calls is John the Baptist.

Of John the Baptist, the scriptures say, "There came a man, sent from God, whose name was John. He came for a witness, that he might bear witness of the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came that he might bear witness of the light." John was a bold and courageous man, cast from the same mold as the Old Testament prophets. The sheer force of his personality and power of his preaching was attracting great crowds. But as John himself said, he was not the light but came that he might bear witness to the light. His sole mission was to prepare the way for the "Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." He never sought glory for himself but rather for him whose sandals he felt unworthy to tie. He told his disciples, "He must increase but I must decrease," even instructing them to leave him and follow Jesus. After he had accomplished that, John's role in the drama was finished.

Jesus now summons a SECOND witness, one whose testimony is even MORE INCONTROVERTIBLE than John's- the testimony of his own works and miracles. He said, "If you do not believe me, then believe the works that I do for they testify of me." In the first five chapters alone, Jesus had transformed water into wine, revealed the sinful past of a Samaritan woman, healed a nobleman's son, and raised a man who had been lame for thirty-eight years. These works were never an end in themselves but evidence designed to cast light on his divine mission. His purpose was not just to cure them physically, but that through their healing, they might also believe in the HEALER and become spiritually whole as well. With each miracle, Jesus made new converts, new disciples who, in turn, became witnesses themselves, testifying to Jesus' great power.

And Jesus has still MORE witnesses to summon. In v. 37 he says, "And the Father who sent me, he has borne witness of me." His heavenly Father was a witness at his baptism when the dove, representing the Holy Spirit, descended upon him and he spoke from the heavens

declaring, “This is my Son in whom I am well pleased.” It was the Father who was responsible for all his miracles and his teachings, and Jesus was quick to attribute the source of all his power and wisdom ultimately to Him. The Father also spoke to men’s minds and hearts through his Holy Spirit, testifying as to the truthfulness of his Son’s ministry. Jesus says on different occasions that he is in the Father and the Father is in him, or that he has come from God, or that it is the Father who has sent him. Thus Jesus not only had the witness of John the Baptist, the witness of his works and miracles, but he also had the witness of his heavenly Father, the same God that the Jews claimed as Father.

But Jesus doesn’t stop there. He goes on to say, “You search the scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of me.” Jesus was no historical accident but the fulfillment of a divine plan to save his creation from destroying itself, a strategy that was spelled out in the Old Testament. On another occasion, Jesus told them, “Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day; and he saw it and was glad.” Abraham did not know Jesus personally but he knew that the promises he had received from God- that “all people on earth would be blessed” through him (12:3), and that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in heaven (15:5), could only be fulfilled in the distant future by God’s Messiah. Abraham looked beyond the promises themselves to the Promised One- and he rejoiced in it! Jesus says that if they really accepted what Abraham said, they would believe Jesus and rejoice as well.

The fact is that it doesn’t do you any good to have the scriptures in your hand--a virtual love letter from God--when you don’t know who the LOVER is who sends it. It’s like the speaker we once had in chapel when I was in college- a man who had a photographic memory. His particular gift was that he had memorized the entire King James Bible from cover to cover. Students were asked to throw out various chapter and verses and he would immediately quote them straight from memory. However, when he was asked what those verses meant, he couldn’t tell us. In other words, he knew the book but not the author!

The Jews were like this, they knew the book but not the author. They could not recognize Christ in their Scriptures because they did not have the truth within themselves to help them see and understand it. The scribes had amassed a vast amount of learning about the Bible- they knew how many verses and letters there were in all the Old Testament books. They could even tell you what was the middle verse of any given book. Yet, all their incredible mass of information was useless because they failed to know the book’s author and understand what the Bible said. The Jews not only had access to God’s word- it had been expressly given to them. Yet, how could it have been any use to them if they had not first accepted the ONE whom God had sent, his divine “Word.” Jesus had said that he speaks the words of God (3:34), and anyone who wishes to have life must hear his word and believe him who sent him (5:24). Hence, it is not possible for God’s life to abide in those who open themselves up to the word of scripture and yet remain closed to the living, personal Word of God himself- Jesus Christ.

But Jesus has another witness to introduce on his behalf and that is the witness of Moses. He tells them, “For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?” He says that at the Final

Judgment, they will appeal to Moses as their defense- but instead, Moses will become their accuser. Yes, Moses gave God's people the Law, but the Law was not meant to save, only condemn. The Law was given in order to reveal their own sins and shortcomings, to point them in the direction of and expose their need for- a savior. Jesus was that Savior but they missed him entirely.

Thus, Jesus becomes both defendant and defense lawyer. He is summoned to give account of himself and, using the Jews own law--that the truth must be validated out of the mouth of two or three witnesses--he produces one witness after another to substantiate his claims about God and himself. Jesus appeals to the witness of John the Baptist, of his works, of his Father, of the scriptures, and even of Moses. He tells the Jews that they cannot use ignorance for a defense. They cannot say they do not know who he is or what he stands for when they have been given every advantage- they are Israelites; they are heirs of God's ancient revelation; they have his word in their own scriptures. However, all the revelation in the world cannot help them if, as it says in our text, they do not love God and if they continue to seek their own glory rather than God's. The bottom line is that since God is not in them, they cannot recognize or accept either the testimony of John, of scripture, of Abraham or Moses, or of Christ's works as the actions of God's Son.

Now John's gospel was not written for Jews, but for the CHURCH, and he wrote this to serve warning that in the very same way that the Jews, those experts in the Law, the heirs of God's covenant, his Chosen People, disregarded the overwhelming evidence and testimony about Christ, so too does the CHURCH run that risk. Of course, we don't deny Christ in the same way the Jews did- we don't call him a liar, a cheat, a blasphemer. We aren't trying to crucify him afresh.

Rather, our rejection of Christ is far more subtle- we may pretend to live by his truth when his truth has never been in us. We may open the scriptures, God's written Word, but they may never open US up- to convict us of sin or convince us of a real need for the living, personal Word HIMSELF. We may be great Presbyterians- Sunday after Sunday, sitting in our lovely sanctuaries, praying all the prayers, humming all the hymns, yet never allowing our hearts to become a REAL SANCTUARY for Jesus to dwell in. We may be active on all kinds of church boards and committees and be exceedingly generous with our tithe and our time, but unless Christ is first active in US, developing his spiritual fruit in OUR lives, the church is just an organization and never an extension of his kingdom.

Well, of course, this leads us to one FINAL witness that we have not spoken about, one as important as all the others we have looked at- especially on Pentecost Sunday, the day the early church received the Holy Spirit--the SPIRIT OF JESUS CHRIST HIMSELF--to guide and comfort them. Jesus told his disciples just prior to his arrest, "When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the father, he will bear witness of me; and YOU will bear witness also, because you have been with me from the beginning." Because the Jews, in their pride, had hardened their hearts to God, the truth was not in them and so they rejected those witnesses that testify of Jesus. However, upon his resurrection, Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit to his own which meant God taking up

residence within them. That Spirit would open up their own hearts and understanding to receive the truth, to believe those witnesses, to comprehend Christ's ministry, and to transform THEM into Christ's witnesses as well. John repeats this in his first epistle when he writes, "Everybody who believes in the Son of God has this testimony inside..." With the activity of the Holy Spirit within them, the disciples and rest of Christ's followers would be empowered to become the greatest evidence yet to the reality of Jesus. As Jesus promised his disciples, "...you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth."

As we have seen, this idea of "witness" plays a prominent role in John's gospel. He uses the noun fourteen times, whereas Mark uses it only three times, Luke once and Matthew none at all. He uses the corresponding verb "to witness" thirty-three times while Matthew and Luke employ it only once and Mark none. But to John, a witness is more than an observer, more than one who testifies to something he or she has seen- a REAL witness COMMITS HIM OR HIMSELF to that truth. It is not enough for a witness to simply say he or she saw something and that is all. To be a witness in the CHRISTIAN sense implies something ENTIRELY DIFFERENT, however. The word John uses for "witness" is the Greek word "Marturia" from which we get the word "martyr" or one who is a "witness unto death," one who willingly lays down his or her own life for a cause one deeply believes in. For John, not only does a true witness see and hear and testify to what he has seen, he also BELIEVES IN AND COMMITS HIS VERY LIFE to what he has just seen and heard.

JOHN THE BAPTIST bore witness of Jesus because he was "the Lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world." The FATHER witnesses of Jesus because Christ is his faithful Son. The SPIRIT witnesses of Jesus because it proceeds from Christ. The SCRIPTURES bear witness of Christ because they were written about him to prepare God's people for his coming. The DISCIPLES bear witness by becoming the physical embodiment of Christ in the world which is why we have received the name the "Body of Christ." Once they realized how they were the object of his surpassing love, they then testified of him, not out of some passing interest, but because his LIFE and WORDS and CAUSE had penetrated their very souls and become the center of their OWN lives! But as we see throughout the gospels, the tragedy is that people did NOT believe God's witnesses. As Jesus said to Nicodemus, "Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak that which we know, and bear witness of that which we have seen; and you do not receive our witness."

Church, we now find OURSELVES in that jury box this morning and we are asked to render our OWN verdict. Jesus or John the Baptist or even Perry Mason cannot make that decision for us- we have the very personal duty of doing that OURSELVES. We have heard all the witnesses and studied all the evidence. The question we must answer is this- "Are those witnesses credible? Can we trust their testimony? Can Jesus REALLY BE the Son of God, the Lamb 'that takes away the sins of the world'?" The answer we are asked to provide is not just a simple "yes" or "no," not a thumbs up or a thumbs down- it implies much more than that. It means that if we say "yes," that more than our brain is in agreement with John the Baptist and Abraham and Moses, but our HEARTS as well. It means that we have arrived at our

conclusion not by a process of reasoning alone but by an actual decision of faith through a total personal commitment. OUR FAITH becomes a response to the testimony of Christ's witnesses and they tell us that Jesus is not one object of faith among many objects of faith but that the full revelation of God is given in him. To say "yes" to Christ is to realize that we are the object of his love and that our response to him can be nothing less than a complete dedication of our lives to him. It means, just as it had to his disciples, WE have become witnesses ourselves, not out of some passing interest, but because his life and words and cause has penetrated OUR very soul and become the center of OUR own lives! We thus find ourselves this morning challenged to become MORE than just good pew sitters and hymn singers and tithers and workers, MORE than just good Presbyterians, but ABOVE ALL, GOOD "WITNESSES," persons whose commitment goes BEYOND that of a church and a denomination to JESUS CHRIST HIMSELF. Then we are assured that in that Last Day, he will testify of US before the Father even as we testify of HIM before the WORLD. Let us pray...

*Gracious God, our Heavenly Father, you have provided this world with many witnesses as to who Jesus is and if we have denied that Christ is your Son who proceeded directly from you, denied the truthfulness of his words and the power of his actions, then it because we have allowed ourselves to be deceived by the ruler of this world and blind to the alternative that offers us truth instead of lies, and life instead of death. Help us to recognize in Jesus the ONE person in all the world who can lead us to TRUE freedom- freedom from sin and freedom from our ourselves along with all our worst impulses, that we might exclaim along with that great hymn, "I once was lost but now I'm found, was blind but now I see." Amen and amen.*