

7 Easter-A, May 4, 2008
Galilee Church, Virginia Beach, VA
A sermon by the Rev. Dr. James B. Magness

Acts 1.6-14
Psalm 68.1-10,33-36
I Peter 4.12-14,5.6-11
John 17.1-11

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

One morning last week I had left home in my car driving to my office here at the church. I took the route I've taken almost every day for the last 5½ months. Just as I passed in front of a familiar gas station I took notice of what I considered to be an exorbitant per gallon gas price. Just then I noticed out of the corner of my eye a car coming from the opposite direction and turning across my path in front of me. At first I was sure that this car would stop and let me pass by, for there was no way that a turn in front of me could be safely executed. Apparently the driver of the other car didn't see me until it was certain that we would have a crash. As if in slow motion the other car finally began to brake two-thirds through the turn, not quite yet in my path. Fearing the crash, a couple of thoughts quickly raced through my mind. First, press on the brake pedal as hard as I could. Fortunately, the anti-lock brakes on my old Volvo didn't let me down. Simultaneously, I remember thinking that if we do make contact with one another at least there will be a number of witnesses present to tell the police what happened.

Fortunately, we did not crash into one another. Though our cars were within a foot or two of each other, we were able to avoid contact and the subsequent crash. I was exceptionally glad that I did not have reason to rely upon witnesses of the crash that never happened.

Witnesses play a major role in our Bible story today. Jesus told his disciples that they were to be witnesses to Him. The act of being a witness has two distinct parts.

The first part is to bear witness to Jesus' ascent into the clouds. According to the lesson in the book of Acts, the twelve disciples were there with him and saw the entire event. They were present in order to see what happened to Jesus so they could be witnesses who would go and tell others what had happened.

The second part of bearing witness is to be a witness to the power of the Holy Spirit. This is where we come in and become a part of the Christian story. William Larkin writes that a witness (gr. martyrs) is a person who speaks from a personal acquaintance with the facts of an event. The apostles were eyewitnesses of the saving events and therefore witnesses. However, “...all those who will believe and appropriate the truth of

their testimony also qualify as witnesses.”¹ This last category qualifies us to be witnesses to an event that happened over two thousand years ago.

In the late 1980s there was a World Congress on Evangelism in Manila. At this conference the participants heard speakers acknowledge that at that time there were over twelve thousand distinct cultural groups in the world “...that have no church in their language and culture.”²

Obviously, if the ministry of bearing witness to Christ is of importance to us, then there is plenty to be done by those of us who profess faith in the Lord Jesus. However, we don't always have to cross an ocean in order to do the work of being a witness to Christ.

A significant portion of the ministry of a witness is just down the street from us or right on the corner where we live. Once a month a number of us go down the street to work with a ministry called People in Need that ministers to homeless and displaced people. We help to feed them, clothe them, provide them with medical care and proclaim the Gospel of Christ to them.

In another ministry of witness during the week our deacon Patti Davis works as a chaplain in a nursing home. Beyond a shadow of a doubt she fulfills the ministry of being a witness to the risen Lord Christ to a host of people who would otherwise not hear or see the witness of a Christ-follower.

Once a person commits to the idea of bearing witness, then how does witness happen? I mean, how do we bring people to the awareness of and faith in the Lordship of Christ in their lives?

A few years ago the rock star Bono was visiting with a U.S. senator in hopes to get that senator to commit to debt relief for Africa. Though Bono brought with him a briefcase of facts and figures, he never opened the briefcase. On the spot he changed the direction of the conversation. Realizing that the senator was known to have a great deal of religious conviction, Bono began to talk about Christ's deep concern for the sick and the poor. That decision was so fruitful that it yielded \$435 million dollars for debt relief. According to some, what Bono did was to engage in the art of the “woo.”³ That is, he woo'd the other person. When Charles Lindberg got backing for his trans-Atlantic flight and Nelson Mandela got supporters for a peaceful revolution in South Africa, they used the art of woo.

¹ William J. Larkin, Jr. *Acts: the IVP New Testament Commentary Series*. (Inter Varsity Press, Downers Grove, IL: 1995) pp. 41-42.

² *Ibid.*

³ Mario Moussa and G. Richard Shell, *The Art of Woo*. Knowledge @ Wharton Web Site, October 17, 2007, <http://knowledgewharton.upenn.edu>.

As Christians we don't use the word woo very often. When we think about being a witness to and for Christ we talk about evangelism. Reading about the call to baptize people of all nations in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit we know that the call is to avoid coercion, but to use emotionally intelligent persuasion. We are called to persuade and welcome people into the Church of Jesus Christ.

But how do we do it? The challenge is immense; perhaps to many of us the challenge is even overwhelming.

Next Sunday is a big day in the church calendar. It is the Sunday of Pentecost. It is the Sunday when we remember that the Church of Jesus Christ has been endowed with the power of the Holy Spirit to accomplish these and other tasks. As Jesus ascended into heaven, his father left the church with the power of the Holy Spirit. In the scriptures Jesus told his disciples, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."⁴

The word "power" comes from the Greek word dynamis, which we also apply in English to the word dynamite. This power is an earth shaking force that must be used wisely. That is why many of us are spending time every Thursday evening to discern the powerful gifts of the Holy Spirit that God has given us. We know that the gift of this power can be used for good or for ill. Like dynamite, the Holy Spirit has a power that must be respected. There is the sad story of a man by the name of Sam White from Chester, Virginia who was a Civil War relics collector. Sam was cleaning a Civil War naval cannonball – a 150 year old cannonball – that exploded and killed him.⁵ Now the Holy Spirit may not physically kill you, but its power may be used for good or for ill, and must be respected.

There are several things that can be said about what it takes to be an effective witness to Christ while living and walking in the power of the Holy Spirit.

People who effectively witness to the Good news of Christ:

Talk about the ways Christ's teachings have guided and challenged them.

Speak of the times and places they have sensed the presence of Jesus.

Express thanks for the forgiveness they find in Christ.

Share times of inspiration when they have sensed Christ in worship or seen Christ's face in another person.

We are all called to bear witness to Christ, whether it is around the world or just down the street. Given the fact that we want to be effective as we give witness to Christ, I think the first step in our effectiveness is to gather ourselves together in the name of the

⁴ Acts 1.8, *The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version* (Oxford University Press: London, 1990).

⁵ Steve Szkaotak, *Relic collectors shaken after antique cannonball kills man* (The Virginian-Pilot, Norfolk, VA) May 3, 2008, Sec. C, p. 8.

Lord. In the immediate aftermath of Christ's ascension into heaven the men and women who were His disciples knew what they needed to do, not only in order to survive, but to be effective witnesses to and for Christ. The disciples devoted themselves to prayer. I don't know exactly for what they prayed, but I feel fairly sure that many of their prayers were for the effectiveness of their witness so that they could build up their fellowship with more Christ-followers. Currently at Galilee, like these early Christ-followers described in the book of Acts, many of the men in this parish are gathering with one another in order to pray for one another and for the effectiveness of their ministry of witness.

We need to build up this parish and we are doing so. As we do it we will do well to be mindful that fellowship consisting of study, worship and prayer were the key ingredients through which the disciples found the power of the Holy Spirit. For the people of Galilee, as it was for the early disciples, the gateway to the power of the Holy Spirit will be found and experienced through this fellowship.
AMEN.