

"Bearing Witness"

A sermon by the Rev. Jim Bell

Duke Memorial United Methodist Church
Durham, NC
10:55 a.m. Sunday, November 12, 2006

Text: I John 1:1-4 Luke 10:25-37 NRSV

Opening prayer: O God, who has loved us through the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ, open our hearts to your message of our grateful response. Amen.

WE BEAR WITNESS

In a Peanuts comic strip, Linus listens attentively as his sister, Lucy, tells him about her potential as an evangelist. She says to Linus, "I would have made a jgood evangelist. Do you know that kid who sits behind me at school? I convinced him that my religion is better than his religion." Linus asks, "How did you do that?" Lucy replies, "I hit him with my lunch box!"

That is not the best way to witness to someone! We bear witness to Christ's love by living our faith.

Our world desperately needs Christ-followers who are consistent and congruent – who live with integrity. People who walk the talk – who live what they believe. To live this way is challenging. It can very difficult at times.

To live a consistent Christian walk, we need motivation. To bear witness to Christ's love is to live out our thank you. We are so grateful because we realize all that God has done for us.

Jesus Christ has saved me from sin and eternal death. I want to live every day in

saying thank you. When someone saves your life, you want to do all that you can to express your gratitude.

The summer that our daughter Sarah was 13 years old, she was a rising eighth grader. One day she was riding in the front passenger seat of a vehicle driven by Cindy Smith. Cindy and Sarah were running errands with Cindy's two elementary-school age children, who Sarah sometimes babysat. The two children were in the rear seat of the vehicle. They were traveling along US Highway 17, a busy five-lane highway in Hampstead.

At one point, Sarah noticed that the vehicle was drifting to the left. She looked over at Cindy. Cindy looked unconscious. Sarah yelled, telling Cindy what was happening. When Cindy didn't respond, Sarah grabbed the steering wheel. She managed to get her foot on the brake, so that the car would not swerve into the lanes of oncoming traffic. She then had the presence of mind to let traffic pass and then made a life turn into the Topsail Middle School parking lot. She stopped the vehicle in the parking lot. She ran into the office where she asked the assistant principal to call an ambulance.

Cindy had blacked out due to a reaction of some medication. Sarah's quick thinking and action avoided a disastrous head-on collision. It may have saved their lives. Thank God! Afterwards, Cindy could not thank Sarah enough. That is the way it is when someone saves your life.

The Lord Jesus has saved our lives. We want to do all that we can to express our gratitude. We express our gratitude by living our faith, by bearing witness to Christ.

In his first letter, the apostle John bears witness to Jesus. John heard Jesus with his own ears. He saw Jesus with his own eyes. John touched him with his own hands. Jesus was, and is, real. John witnesses to this eternal life – who was with God the

Father and who appeared to John and the other disciples. John explained it in his gospel this way, “The Word became flesh and lived among us.” (John 1:14)

John is proclaiming. John is testifying. John is declaring. John is bearing witness to Jesus.

Now, I have not heard Jesus speak audibly. I have not seen him walk along a road. I have not touched his hands. However, I have experienced his incredible love – a love I do not deserve, a love I cannot earn, a love I do not fully understand. I have experienced Jesus’ love through the Scriptures, through prayer, through spiritual renewal events like the Walk to Emmaus, and through the love of other Christians all of my life. I want to bear witness to that love.

WORK AND FAMILY

We share Christ from the heart of Durham by bearing witness to Christ’s love. Our recently-adopted vision for our church says it this way: Duke Memorial United Methodist Church bears witness to Christ’s love through members’ daily life and work, in family life, and in acts of justice, service, and compassion to our brothers and sisters in this community and around the globe.

We bear witness to Christ’s love by the way we live and work.

Harry Ironside grew up in Scotland in the early years of the 20th century. When he was a boy, he helped his widowed mother make ends meet by working on Saturdays and during school vacations. Harry worked for a shoemaker named Dan Mackay. Mr. Mackay was a forthright Christian, and his little shop was a real testimony for Christ in the neighborhood.

Harry’s chief responsibility was to pound leather for shoe soles. A piece of cowhide would be cut to fit the size of the shoe, then soaked in water. With a flat piece

of iron over his knees and a flat-headed hammer, Harry pounded these soles until they were hard and dry. Sometimes it seemed to take forever.

A block down the road was another shoe shop that Harry passed on his way back home. In it sat a godless cobbler who gathered the boys of the neighborhood about him and regaled them with lewd tales. Somehow, his business seemed to thrive. When Harry looked in the window, he often noticed that this cobbler never pounded the soles at all, but took them from the water and nailed them on as damp as they were. When Harry asked him about it one day, the cobbler gave him a wicked leer and answered, "They come back all the quicker this way, my boy!"

Harry went back to his boss and told him what he had learned. Harry suggested that perhaps he was wasting his time in drying out the leather so carefully. Mr. Mackay stopped his work and opened his Bible to the passage that reads, "Whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God." (I Corinthians 10:31)

He said, "Harry, I do not cobble shoes just for the four bits and six bits that I get from my customers. I am doing this for the glory of God. I expect to see every shoe I have ever repaired in a big pile at the judgment seat of Christ. I do not want the Lord to say to me in that day, 'Dan, this was a poor job. You did not do your best here.' I want him to be able to say, 'Well done, good and faithful servant.'"

We witness to Christ's love in the way that we work at our vocations. We also witness to Christ's love by the way that we interact in our family relationships.

When Robin Gunn was a teenager, she worked as a waitress at Coco's Restaurant in southern California. Although California nights are supposed to be warm, on this particular February night, the brisk wind shrieked through the front door. Around 9:00 things slowed down, and that's when she started feeling sorry for herself. All of her friends had gone to the movies, but she had to work until closing.

She didn't pay much attention to the man who entered the restaurant. A flurry of leaves followed him in. The sound of the wailing wind fell silent as the door closed. I busied myself making more coffee. Suddenly the hostess grabbed my arm. She whispered, "This is really creepy, but there's a man with a white moustache over there who said he wouldn't eat here unless you were his waitress." Robin swallowed hard, "Is he a weirdo?" The hostess said, "See for yourself."

They carefully peered through the decorative foliage at the mysterious man in the corner. Slowly he lowered his menu, revealing, thick, white hair, silver-blue eyes, and a wide grin beneath his white moustache. He lifted his hand and waved. Robin exclaimed, "That's no weirdo! That's my dad!"

The hostess balked, "You mean he came to see you at work? That's pretty strange, if you ask me." Robin didn't think it was very strange. She thought it was kind of neat. She went and served her father. She rattled off the soup of the day and scribbled down his order before anyone could see him squeeze her elbow and say, "Thanks, honey."

Robin never forgot that night. Her father being there said a thousand things to her. As he silently watched her clear tables and refill coffee cups, she could hear his unspoken words bouncing off the walls: "I'm here. I support you. I'm proud of you. You're doing a good job. Keep up the good work. I love you." It was the best valentine she received that year.

ACTS OF JUSTICE, SERVICE AND COMPASSION

We bear witness to Christ's love by the way that we treat our family. We also bear witness through acts of justice, service and compassion.

In our gospel lesson for today, Jesus tells the lawyer, "Love your neighbor as

yourself.” (Luke 10:27) Then Jesus used the Parable of the Good Samaritan to explain that instruction. The actions of the Samaritan toward the man who had been beaten and robbed were a radical expression of compassion. The Samaritan bandages the man’s wounds. He gives him medicine. The Samaritan carries the beaten man to an inn and takes care of him. Then he gives the innkeeper money, so that the innkeeper would continue to care for the man in crisis.

We bear witness to Christ’s love when we care for people who need help. One act of justice related to this parable is helping people in our country who do not have health insurance to obtain some form of affordable health insurance. I am grateful that there is Medicare and Medicaid. However, there are still too many people today who face this decision: Am I going to eat today or will I purchase this prescription? They have enough money to do one or the other, but not both.

There are people with needs all around us. What can we do to help the people who approach us in the church parking lot and ask us for money, supposedly for food? What I want to do is to help people with the compassion of Christ. Love your neighbor as yourself. However, giving them cash in all likelihood does not help them.

Guidance from various service agencies and testimonies from former panhandlers and people who have been addicted to alcohol and drugs tell us to never give cash. Often, if not always, the cash goes to purchase more drugs.

Some of the things that we can do if we wish to love our neighbor as ourselves is to serve at Urban Ministries of Durham. On the 3rd Tuesday afternoon of each month, our church has the responsibility of helping to operate the food pantry there. We can help with the soup kitchen. Another way to serve is to volunteer with the Durham Interfaith Hospitality Network. Another act of compassion is to give to our church’s Good Samaritan Fund. This fund helps people in our congregation and outside our

church who are experiencing economic crisis with rent and utility payments and other needs. We have had many requests this fall, and the funds are now depleted.

We bear witness to Christ's love in this community and around the globe. Last May a group of us traveled to Pascagoula, Mississippi, to help some residents with Hurricane Katrina relief. One of the people we helped was an elderly gentleman named Pat Wilson. Pat could not make the needed repairs himself. His family and friends could not help him, so we helped him. "Love your neighbor as yourself."

When someone asks, "Why are you repairing and painting this house in Pascagoula?" or "Why do you have homeless people sleep at your church?" or "Why do you collect food for hungry people?" we answer: "Because we are followers of Jesus Christ, and Jesus has told us to love your neighbor as yourself."

We bear witness to Christ's love by living our faith, by putting it into action.

Rob Mouw played on the soccer team in his senior year at Wheaton Christian High School. It was the final seconds of a big game against favored Waubonsie Valley. His team was behind by one goal. Rob was dribbling the ball in front of him, running at full speed toward the opponent's goal. Just before he shot the ball, he caught sight of the scoreboard. The clock read 00.00. But like any good athlete, Rob shot the ball anyway. It went in for a goal. The referee signaled that the goal counted, and the game finished in a tie.

The Wheaton fans cheered. The Waubonsie Valley fans cried that time had run out. Rob had a choice to make. He could say nothing and avoid a loss. After all, it was the referee's job to decide the calls, not his. Or Rob could do what was right.

Rob asked the referee whether the official time was kept on the scoreboard or the referee's stopwatch. The referee said the scoreboard time was official and then ran off the field. Rob went to his coaches. He explained that just before his kick, he had

seen zeros on the scoreboard clock. Since he hadn't heard a whistle, he kept playing. But his goal was late, and he didn't think it should count.

His coaches agreed, so they went over to the opposing coaches, explained what had happened, and conceded victory to Waubonsie Valley. Rob later told a sportswriter, "Every time in your life you have an opportunity to do right, you should be thankful. For a person to know what right is, and then not to do it – that would be a sin. To have won the game – I mean, really, who cares? Doing the right thing is more important. It lets you have peace."

Each of us has a choice also. We have the privilege and opportunity to bear witness to Christ's love by living our faith. We will have the choice later today and tomorrow and the next day and every day after that.

I invite you now to dedicate or rededicate yourself to live for Jesus Christ. We are going to have a time for silent, individual prayer. Then I will conclude in prayer. Let us pray . . .

Closing prayer: Lord Jesus, you love us so much, and we are grateful. We want to love you. Help us to put that love into action by the way we think and speak and act and live. We pray in your holy name. Amen.