

No Jehovah's Bystanders

Acts 1:1-8

Guest preacher: Dr. Thomas Gillespie, President Emeritus - Princeton Theological Seminary

Sunday, July 19, 2009

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Comedian Flip Wilson once quipped, "I'm a Jehovah's Bystander. They asked me to be a Witness, but I didn't want to get involved." That may be humorous, but it is not an option for Christians. "You shall be my witnesses," said the risen Christ to the disciples. More fully, "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth." Now that second person pronoun is a plural. It's a 'you all' as Southerners are wont to say. I once had a seminary student from Texas explain that to me. "Do you know how in Greek there is a second person singular and a second person plural that are distinguishable," he asked. I acknowledged that I did. "Well," he continued, "when Southerners say 'You' they mean just you, but when they say 'You all' they mean everybody. Another Texas friend refined that explanation. She agreed that a simple 'you' refers to an individual, but went on to say that a 'you all' refers to several and if you mean everyone you say 'all you all.'"

As far as we know Jesus did not speak Greek, but he was talking southern Aramaic to his disciples that day. When he said, "You shall be my witnesses" he meant "all you all." In other words, we cannot be disciples of Jesus and Jehovah's Bystanders. We have to get involved.

But we should not feel picked on. This task, this responsibility, this opportunity, this privilege was laid on the people of God long before Jesus got around to doing it. The prophet of God said to the people of God in their Babylonian exile: "You are my witnesses, says the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe me and understand that I am He (Isaiah 43:10).

There is a story behind that prophetic text from Isaiah. Almost six hundred years before Christ the Babylonian army swept over the Judean hills and besieged Jerusalem. Eventually they breached the walls, destroyed the palace, burned the temple, and carried off into captivity the king, the nobility, the priesthood, the merchants, and everyone else who had leadership abilities.

Only the poor, the peasants, the people of the land as they were called, only they were left behind. These upper and middle classes were re-settled in suburban Babylon, along with all the other displaced peoples whose lands had also been overrun by King Nebuchadnezzar and his hordes. It was a time for the Israelites to keep a low profile, to circle up the wagons, to go into laager. It was a time to nurse their wounds quietly and to wonder how they would keep their faith alive without any of the cultural supports they had enjoyed back home.

Could they continue to believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob without the promised land, without the support of their king, without a royal priesthood, and without the temple and its Holy of Holies where their God dwelt among them? And to make matters even worse they are told by God's prophet that they are to be his witnesses in this multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-racial and religiously pluralistic situation.

But the prophet views history itself as a great trial where the issue is the identity of God. Who is God? Who is God really? Who really is God? As he puts it, "Let all the nations gather together, and let the peoples assemble. Let them bring their witnesses to justify them, And let them hear and say, It is true."

You see, everyone is religious. Even those who say they are not. Belonging to a church or a synagogue or a mosque or a temple does not make us religious. Believing in God does not make us religious. Buddhism is generally recognized as a religion and it takes forms that do not include belief in a god. Being human makes us religious. For we all believe in something, something basic, something fundamental, something upon which everything else depends and depends itself upon nothing else. And then we orient our lives to that something and derive our beliefs, our values, our morals from whatever that basic

something may happen to be. For thorough-going materialists that something is sub-atomic energy. Everything can be reduced to its material basis. And life is constructed on that basis. So the prophet's metaphor of history as a trial of the God issue is apt.

Now I tell you this story of exilic Israel because their situation long ago in Babylon is analogous to that of the Christian Church in America today. More and more contemporary observers speak of the American Church in cultural exile. American Church History Professor Dorothy Bass writes of the three disestablishments of the Church in the history of our country.¹ The first was the political disestablishment of the Church that occurred in 1787 when we adopted our constitution with its provision for the separation of Church and State. The second she calls the social disestablishment of Protestantism that was achieved about 1950 when Will Herberg published his best-selling book *Protestant, Catholic, and Jew*, making the point that one could be any of the above and an authentic American. The third disestablishment began in the 1960s with the cultural revolution that produced an ever growing relativistic attitude toward both truth and morality.

Chicago University Professor Allan Bloom spoke to this cultural sea change in his widely read volume, *The Closing of the American Mind*.² He tell us that in meeting a freshman class in the humanities for the first time he knew from his previous teaching experience that these bright-eyed and bushy-tailed young people believed in only two things. They believed that all truth claims were merely matters of opinion and that all morality was a matter of personal life-style preferences.

Now Bloom himself was a Modern man, an old-fashioned Rationalist, a Rene Descarte disciple who believed in the power of universal Reason. What he was writing against was an attitude of mind dubbed 'Post-Modernism' by many academics. To Descarte's claim, *Cogito, ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am), the Post-Modernist replies, "Well, that's what you think."

Whereas the Enlightenment debunked Authority and Tradition as a basis of knowledge, Post-Modernism debunks the concept of a universal Reason by pointing to the great variety of cultural and social ways rationality takes form. That is why it has been called an enlightenment about the Enlightenment.

Add to this the coming to our shores of the other great world religions with immigrants so that the horizon is no longer dominated by Christopher Wren church spires but increasingly by Moslem mosques and Buddhist and Hindu temples. The point is that in addition to the political disestablishment of the Church and the social disestablishment of Protestantism, we are now experiencing what Dorothy Bass calls the "cultural disestablishment of Christianity." In this new context, amidst our own Babylonian-like exile, we hear not the voice of the prophet but that of our risen Lord Jesus Christ saying to us, "All you all shall be my witnesses."

But what does it mean to be a witness? Philosopher Paul Ricoeur³ reminds us that the biblical language of "witness" is a metaphor derived from the social setting of the law court where an issue is being tried, a judge presides, a jury deliberates and decides, lawyers prosecute and defend, and people are called upon to provide testimony. Further, Ricoeur points out, a witness always testifies to what she or he believes to be true, and that testimony is never neutral. It always favors the prosecution or the defense. And most importantly, he notes, that testimony inevitably expresses itself in the form of a story. It is narrated.

Now let's be honest. We Presbyterians are not known for our proficiency in bearing oral witness to our faith. That's something we gladly assign to other types of Christians. I'm not sure why that is. Perhaps it is our Scottish heritage, for Scots are generally folks who feel things deeply but are very reticent about expressing those feelings. I know that from having grown up in a family of immigrant Scots. But whatever the reason we have difficulty in articulating our faith out loud to others. Thus the old joke, What do you get when you cross a Mormon with a Presbyterian? Answer: Someone who knocks on your door and had nothing to say.

But perhaps Professor Ricoeur's description of testimony as a story can be of help to us here. I'm thinking now of a lovely young woman in my former congregation who joined our church out of a different ecclesial tradition. She lived in Hillsborough along with Bing Crosby and others of that status, joined one of our women's sharing groups, and in time had a profound faith renewal experience. One day she said to me,

“Tom, you will never guess what I am doing?” I conceded the truth of that statement and she went on to explain that she was bearing witness to her faith. “Where are you doing this?” I asked. “At cocktail parties,” she responded. (Now where I was raised you were not supposed to be at a cocktail party no matter what you were doing.) “How are you doing this?” I asked. “Well,” she replied, “people come up and ask me what’s new and I tell them what God is doing in my life.”

The author of the Acts of the Apostles would have loved that. For that is precisely what Luke did in writing the history of the embryonic Church. He told stories about what God was doing in the lives of people. Not just the apostles, but people like us, some named and others anonymous. The beauty of story-telling is that it is non-confrontational and non-defensive. Story-telling avoids doctrinal disputes. It does not play the game of ‘My God is bigger and better than your God.’ It simply bears witness to our personal experience of God’s redemptive love in Jesus Christ.

Now I can hear someone countering from the pew, “That’s easy for you to say, standing up there dressed in your black Geneva gown and talking about God to a congregation that has come to hear you do that. But what do you do in your personal life when you are not seven steps above reproach?” That’s a fair question. As a seminary president I did a lot of flying and always without wearing my Geneva gown. It was in many ways a respite from the telephone and committee meetings; in other words, a time for reading. So in the inevitable introductory remarks to the person sitting by me, I was often asked what I did for a living. Now if I wanted to read rather than talk I would say that I am a Presbyterian minister, and the shade would immediately come down. But if I was open to a conversation in the air I would say that I am in insurance-- fire and life. No one ever got it, and it is remarkable how often issues of faith arose in our discussions at thirty-seven thousand feet above the ground. What made it challenging was that I could not use any of that theological language taught in seminaries. I was just one human being talking to another about matters of ultimate significance in terms of my own faith journey.

But one flight was different and for that reason memorable. I was flying from Newark to Chicago for a national church meeting. I was supposed to have read a small volume in preparation for the meeting, and the two hour flight was just the amount of time I needed. My seat mate that afternoon introduced himself as a medical doctor and asked what I did vocationally. Wanting desperately to read and not talk, I confessed that I was a Presbyterian minister. “Oh,” he exclaimed, “I’ve always wanted to talk to someone like you.” So for the next two hours we discussed issues he raised about religion, and the book was never read. He told me that he was ethnically Jewish, but not at all a believer. And so it went until the plane’s wheels touched down at O’Hare. As we were hurtling down the runway with the engines reversed, he said to me, “Tell me the truth. Do people really believe all that stuff?” “It all depends on what you mean by ‘all that stuff’” I replied. “Well, you know, God and Jesus and the resurrection.”

I explained that I began ministry as the pastor of two Presbyterian congregations out in California, and in both there were numerous physicians as scientifically trained as he was who believed all that stuff along with a whole lot of other very bright people. The plane docked at the gate, the door opened, and we said our goodbyes. I have no idea what God did with that word of testimony. But that is not my business. I am called simply to bear that witness. And so are you even in a time of cultural exile.

Mikhail Bakhtin,⁴ the noted Russian literary critic, describes how our Western culture has moved from the Age of Faith to the Age of Reason to the Age of Science to the post-modern Age of Suspicion until we have now arrived at what he calls the Age of Carnival. Consider the difference between a circus and a carnival. A circus is a very Modern project with its rationality evident in the center ring and its two side rings. Even the routine of the clowns acting up around the edges is programmed. But a carnival is a different matter altogether. At a carnival there is a ride over here with a barker trying to get you to take it. There are games here and there with more barkers talking you into playing them. There are the side shows with their barkers enticing you to come in for a look see. It is chaos...and fun.

That is a fair description of our post-modern American culture in which people believe that all truth claims are matters of opinion and all morality is a matter of life style choices. The American Church lives and moves and has its being at present in the midst of this cultural carnival, and it has every right to raise its voice among all the others in testimony to the God we know in Jesus Christ. But more than the right. We have the responsibility to do so as well.

For in the cacophony and above the din of the carnival we still hear the voice of Jesus saying to his disciples, "You shall be my witnesses. You all shall be my witnesses. All you all shall be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth."

1 Bass, Dorothy C., Benton Johnson and Wade Clark Roof Bass. *Mainstream Protestantism in the Twentieth Century: Its Problems and Prospects*. (pamphlet) 1987.

2 Bloom, Allan. *The Closing of the American Mind*. New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1987.

3 Ricoeur, Paul. "The Hermeneutics of Testimony," in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*. 1980.

4 See Dentith, Simon, *Bakhtinian Thought: An Introductory Reader*. Routledge: New York 1995.

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