

## Practicing Our Faith: Testimony

A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on Acts 4:1-21  
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC, on July 23, 2017

One of the cinematic gems of the 1990s was a comedy called *Crazy People*, about the hijinks of Emory Leeson, an advertising executive played by Dudley Moore who, when faced with stagnation in his work, ran with a crazy idea on a whim. That crazy idea? What if the ads we created were ruthlessly honest and actually told the truth, rather than some form of the truth at best or a lie at worst just to sell a product? Things like: "Volvos: they're boxy, but they're safe," or "United Airlines: most of our passengers get there alive." It's no surprise that Emory's nontraditional ads get him in trouble with his boss and the companies they represent. They actually think he's losing his mind, and ship him off to a psychiatric hospital to restore his sanity. But wouldn't you know it — when those ads got accidentally released to the public, the people couldn't get enough of them! Shocked but delighted, it seems that the throngs of people who began buying Volvos and flying United were starving for a truth they didn't even know they needed!<sup>1</sup>

Halfway through our Practicing our Faith series, today we turn to the practice of testimony, *how we talk about God and faith in our everyday lives*.<sup>2</sup> Over time in certain Christian contexts, the term "testimony" has meant sharing an autobiographical account about how one has become a Christian. The first time I remembered hearing a "testimony" like that was in a high school Young Life gathering, where the testifier spoke of his life deeply under the influence. His vices were numerous — drugs, alcohol, women, power, influence — but in a dramatic way, God had saved him from himself and in Christ, he came to new

---

<sup>1</sup> As told in Tom Long's book *Testimony*, p91. See next footnote for more.

<sup>2</sup> This definition emerges from Tom Long's outstanding book in the *Practicing Our Faith Series* called *Testimony: Talking Ourselves Into Begin Christian*, from which I will draw heavily throughout the sermon.

life. It was a beautiful story, one with great impact, I remembered as I glanced around the meeting hall. But caught up within my emotional response to this redemption story was a personal flash of fear. I was a good church girl! A preacher's kid! The president of our Youth Council! The worst offense I had ever done was the time I stole the rainbow magnet from our town's gift shop while there with my mama at the age of 7, but then awash in my guilt, burst into tears and had confessed the whole thing before we even pulled into our driveway! My story doesn't hold a candle to his! It's not dramatic or desperate, but rather a slow build of coming alive to Christ through my rootedness in the church. What kind of testimony, what sort of witness might I ever be able to bear?

I suspect I'm not alone in once feeling a reticence to talking about my experience of God outside of the church. My guess is that some of you might hear this conversation about testimony and think 'wait — I'm supposed to be talking about God and faith in my everyday life? I do it here, on Sundays! Why do I need to talk about it any more than that?'. Or you might hear this and panic, thinking that testimony means convincing every person you meet to accept Jesus into their heart as Lord and Savior otherwise they're not going to heaven, and frankly, you just want to buy your groceries and get home! Others of you might start envisioning faith talk at the cocktail party or in the boardroom, and immediately start fearing what people will be saying about you behind your back. Or perhaps you hear this with a healthy dose of cynicism, thinking 'preacher, do you not watch the news and understand how deeply divided our country is? Why in the world would I *bring up* religion in the public sphere? Isn't that just asking for a fight?' But maybe you hear in this definition an invitation to tell the truth in the midst of everyday life, and you feel it in your gut that you can't tell the deep and honest truth about anything *without* talking about how in God, *you* come alive.

Journalist Krista Tippett begins each episode of her podcast *On Being* by asking her interviewee about their early experiences with spirituality and faith. "I can disagree with another person's opinion," she explains, "but I can't disagree

with his or her experience. Because I know where they are coming from, I am capable of some understanding—even compassion—about why they think that way. Moreover, because I have heard their story I am able to attach a person, a humanity, to their conclusions, and I will never quite be able to dismiss that position or denomination in the abstract in the same way again.”<sup>3</sup>

Because like those honest ads for cars and airplanes, ‘testimony’ is about a ‘witness’ speaking about their experience, one in which they are telling the truth, the whole truth, so help me God! You recognize these words, don’t you? Borrowed from the court of law, they evoke a situation where someone or something is on trial. Witnesses testify to what they’ve seen and heard, held to the highest standard to tell the truth. Testimony is considered and recorded. And in that trial, the way the judge or jury makes a sound decision is through hearing the truth about what happened.

That pretty well describes the scene we heard Brittany and Andrew read in Acts, where Peter and John — two followers of Christ — have been traveling around, telling people the story of Jesus, healing in his name, inviting all to repent, believe, and be baptized. The Jerusalem religious elite were not having that, and promptly arrested them and put them in prison. The next day, our text tells us, Peter and John were put on trial, where the rulers demanded to know “by what power or name are you doing all these things?” And in the thick of trial, Peter began to tell the truth, of the One who is the foundation of life itself, the One in whose name the lame will walk, and the lion will lie down with the lamb. The religious leaders debated their response and even tried to silence Peter and John, “commanding them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus,” but did you hear the truth that Peter proclaimed? “Whether it’s right in God’s sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must be the judge of that; but we *cannot keep from speaking* about what we’ve seen and heard.”

---

<sup>3</sup> Krista Tippett, host of the podcast *On Being*, as quoted in the “Practicing Our Faith: Testimony” study guide, which can be found at the link: <http://practicingourfaith.org/pdf/Guide%20for%20Testimony.pdf>

Brothers and sisters, our faith is built and bred on the practice of bearing witness, of telling the truth about we have been transformed by God's work of love in our lives and in the world. But we can't tell that story alone, nor can we always make sense of it. We need one another to bring that story to life, to give it the vocabulary and categories within which it makes sense. We need the practices of our communal life of faith to give us space to talk out what we believe. That's why pastor & scholar Tom Long calls the church "the language school of God, the place where we learn how to speak faithfully in the whole of our lives." We come to language school when we worship, shaping our gathering around words of praise and honor, peace and singing, confession and assurance, lament and exhortation, scripture and proclamation, grace and gratitude, response and sending forth. That rhythm, those practices, and all the language captured therein thus spills into our everyday lives in ways we sometimes fail to even realize.

Because when we gather on Sunday and remind ourselves that "the heavens are telling the glory of God," it changes our Monday morning cup of coffee when we're used to arising disgruntled at the start of the work week.

When we gather on Sunday and say "the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof," it changes what we do on a Tuesday when walking past an overturned trash can whose contents have strewn about the grass.

When we gather on Sunday to share the peace of Christ and proclaim to one another that "you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation" it changes how we interact on Wednesday with the politician who makes your blood boil, the homeless woman who crosses your path, the news about people from a country who spike your fear, the disappointment you see when you glance in the mirror.

When we gather on Sunday and announce that "one you weren't a people, and now you are God's own people so *that you can* proclaim God's mighty acts," it changes our Thursday conversation with the disengaged doctor who doesn't seem to take it seriously, the needy friend who demands more than you feel you

can give, the insecure cashier at Walgreens who makes awkward conversation with you.

When we gather on Sunday and hear a call to “be a witness for my Lord,” it changes our Friday night behavior when friends gossip all around us at the restaurant, when racist jokes fill the poker table, when the sale aisles at Target seem to whisper our name.

When we gather on Sunday and tell again the narrative of Peter and John, proclaiming the resurrected Christ in a hostile crowd to which *they could not keep from speaking* about all that they had seen and heard through God in Christ, it changes the stories we tell on Saturday at the tailgate, in the soccer bleachers, on the shorelines, at the K&W, in the dressing room.

For when we gather with our beloved community to practice telling the truth and bearing witness to Love, God transforms us. Worship becomes like a “dress rehearsal for the drama of the Monday-to-Saturday world.”<sup>4</sup> And we can’t help but to testify.

You might not think others pick up on it, but I assure you: I hear that testimony as together we pray for God’s will to be done *on earth* as it is in heaven, and as we end this form of worship to begin again the worship that is our very lives. I hear that testimony when in the face of daily pain, Dick still says to Clem, “this is the day that the Lord has made,” and she responds to her beloved as she has every day for decades, “let us rejoice and be glad in it.” I hear that testimony when Amy reminds us that God is always at work in our lives, when David proclaims scripture with the memory of a life of faithfulness, when John advocates fiercely for the least among us. I hear that testimony as you speak of how you see God in our midst during this season of change, how you remain ever hopeful that God is preparing the way for us ahead. I heard that testimony just this week with one of you who feels like life is throwing dodgeballs at you all week, but here you can experience a holy pause; another of you whose

---

<sup>4</sup> Long, 42.

past should have crowded out any possibility for belief, but for whom hope in God is not lost; yet another who, in the immediacy of a painful new diagnosis, trusts in the wild peace of the Holy Spirit to guide every step of the way. You, beloved community, are bearing witness to Love made flesh, and your testimony is nothing short of significant.

If ever I doubted the role of testimony in this day and age, it was confirmed yet again on Friday as word began to spread about a young man named Ryan Carter who had been killed instantly in a car wreck. You see, Ryan was a 27 year-old graduate of Carson-Newman & McAfee School of Theology. Married to his longtime sweetheart, Megan. Pursuing ministry with a global impact. Beloved by hundreds whose lives intersected with his. Words have poured out all over social media, each one an attempt to grieve and offer comfort, but also to tell the story of the life that was lost: Ryan and John Mark met when they were eight years old on the same bus route. Ryan and Alyssa shared a common experience as seminarians with ADD. Ryan and Mason went on collegiate mission trips together.

And in telling their stories, hundreds of people are bearing witness to the experience of God in Ryan Carter. I didn't know Ryan well — I'd met he and his wife Megan through my mom, as she had mentored Megan in their shared seminary days. But through these testimonies, I'm sure I'm one of countless who now feel connected to him, and by extension, to God. For we're all hearing truth told: "Ryan ... was on a never-ending mission to find those needing love and making sure that they knew love." Whether that mission took him to homeless folks sleeping on the streets or to senior adults on bingo night, Ryan "wouldn't leave until they were certain we cared for them like Jesus does."<sup>5</sup>

And isn't that the very essence of the truth we proclaim? It is a truth that - despite all odds - has been passed down with no evidence, no scientific explanation of the darkness that shrouded that Friday afternoon, no video in the

---

<sup>5</sup> Stories and quotes culled from Facebook posts on July 21-22, 2017 from Barrett Owen, Alyssa Aldape, John-Mark Brown, Mason Boring, Taylor Johnson.

tomb early that Sunday morning. But shouting the truth that sets us free are the words and witnesses, given from generation to generation, communities where two or three are gathered and Christ shows up. "I have seen the Lord!": a testimony, a ruthlessly honest handful of words that changed the world.<sup>6</sup> Now: will you bear witness? Amen!

---

<sup>6</sup> Long, 115.