

...And More Surprise Witnesses

Acts 5:27-32

The Reverend Erica Wimber Avena

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Prayer: Open our minds, eternal God, to consider a new word from you. Help us to listen, to reflect, to reconsider what we think we know of you. Quiet the fears that keep us from living the truth that sets us free, and from bearing witness to your life and story...

Last week we celebrated confirmation as five young people made their commitment of faith and we welcomed them into membership in the church. Such an important moment for these young people and also for this congregation. Truly remarkable also that we were able to accomplish this during the worst of the pandemic. Amie Giguere's sermon was called "Witnesses" last week and she affirmed for those young people and for all of us that we are taking our place in the church and in the world as witnesses to the Holy Spirit.

Today I would like to put a fine point on that message: "...and More Surprise Witnesses." Throughout the gospels Jesus reveals the absence of faith where it should be, and identifies faith where no one expected it to be. Which is how we find or miss faith in the world today, in likely and especially in unlikely places. Is it in church, is it in the building, is it out in nature, is it among the poor, do we find faith when we work for justice? You have been finding faith all through the pandemic, even when we haven't been able to gather; finding other ways to connect and to encourage one another.

Jesus is dismayed by the absence of a real grasp of the tradition and of faith among the Pharisees and the Sadducees, he turns over the tables in the Temple in all four gospels, in righteous protest of their corruption, clearly something all the traditions remembered and recorded. Flipping over the tables of the money changers is more widely told and remembered than the Christmas story itself which we only have in two of the gospels – Matthew and Luke.

And then Jesus goes about identifying faith among the poor, the outcast, the most unlikely of people. A tax collector who is shunned by his community, a woman who has bled for 12 years, non-Jews like Samaritans, one out of ten healed lepers, the one who returns to acknowledge what has happened, and to speak a word of gratitude. These outcasts, have more faith than those born to faith. And if you pull all of these disenfranchised folks together, you can raise up disciples of the Lord, a whole new humanity. I have a friend who calls this the theology of the island of misfit toys (from Rudolf the Red Nosed Reindeer... but I digress).

I'd like to ask you to consider where you find yourself in this list. In what unlikely moment did you, step forward in faith, glimpse the risen Lord out of the corner of your eye, in your life? Is it a moment that has stayed with you, or is it one you choose to push out of your mind?

In this past year of pandemic my husband and I have watched more movies than ever. We were eager to see the Oscars this year, since for once in our lives we had seen a number of the films up for awards. Every year I want to see this show and then completely lose interest in it while I'm watching. The pacing is weirdly slow, given that show business people produce it; the thank-you speeches have a few interesting anecdotes, but they are thank-you's to lists of names of people we mostly do not know. The co-workers, the genius behind the scenes people, an editor, someone with an effective vision for costumes, the spouse, the supportive family. There is no outstanding effort, no star performance, no blockbuster, without a lot of group effort. The Awards show is a version of the same message in the mouth of every award winner.

This makes me think of Peter in Acts. He is a witness to what God has done in the life of Jesus, to the continuing work of the Holy Spirit. He is a witness to this, but so are lots of other people,

mostly unnamed. Peter has been in prison, prevented from spreading the good news of Jesus; Stephen was stoned a couple of chapters ago, Peter isn't doing the work anymore; the last chapters of Acts are an account of Paul's years long stays in prison and his appearance before increasing Jewish and Roman authorities. The main characters, upon whom the spread of the early church depended were all prevented – Stephen, Peter and Paul, from doing that work. They offer short accounts of their faith to the authorities, Paul writes letters from prison, but they are restricted in their movements. How much more could they have done if they were free? In Acts 5 Peter offers the world's briefest sermon to the High Priest who is questioning him:

We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.

Acts describes more about their thwarted attempts to spread the good news of the gospel, than how they did. But if you read carefully, you will see other names, Greek names, Hebrew names...and scholars believe that these people whose full details were known only to those who knew and loved them during their lives were the ones who really made the gospel message known beyond a small group of witnesses. I'd like to thank: Gaius, Jason, Lydia, Barnabus, Priscilla and Aquila, and James, the brother of our Lord who was the leader of the Jerusalem congregation after Jesus died.

This has been the way the church moves forward. There are those who grab the headlines, who are not necessarily the same as those doing the work of it. Moving it forward. Most of the names have been lost to us now, but we know they did the work, otherwise all these years later we would not be gathered here at all. No one would have told us, no one would have thought it was important to tell.

One of the things I have been tremendously moved by in this pandemic is the commitment on the part of so many of you to keep this church viable and strong, even when we had to close the doors for the wider good.

I have been in a position to be a witness to your faith, even while we were separated. I'd like to end by reminding you that the logic of faith is that sometimes it is found in the most unlikely of places, among the most unlikely of people, at unexpected moments. Bear witness to what you see of the Holy Spirit's work; bear witness to the work of God in your life, bear witness to the growth in the Spirit you are in a position to recognize in the life of someone else. You will find that as you bear witness, as Peter did, you will see more; and there will be more surprise witnesses joining their voice to yours. God is alive in the world. Friends, God is doing a new thing. There are witnesses, and more surprise witnesses.

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