

"The Ways We Care: Witness" -- Message for Stewardship Emphasis, October 11, 2009
Rev. Laurie McHugh
Text: Acts 1:1-8

Our membership and baptismal vows in the United Methodist Church were amended at our last General Conference gathering (that's our official church body -- a representative group that has the authority to speak for our whole denomination, and meets once every four years to go over our Book of Discipline and our social statements). It was a big deal to change such a key ritual in our church, and it required a lot of communication, since the words are part of our hymnal which we haven't republished! You may or may not have noticed the change given the frequency of our turning to that part of the book (or lack thereof), and it's small change, but a significant one. We've added just one word to the promises, just one word to the list of expectations of what it means to be a member of the United Methodist Church. You might remember that list: to support the ministries of the church through our prayers, presence, gifts and service. Give me a show of hands: do you remember those? And how many of you know how the list reads now? Say it with me if you do: it's prayers, presence, gifts, service *and witness*. (Let's repeat that: prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness.)

Over the next five weeks we are focusing on each of these promises in turn as we consider the ways that we care: for each other in this congregation, for each other in the Body of Christ, and for the world as disciples of Jesus Christ, in gratitude for the gifts that God has given us. We're not taking them in the order that's used in the book; we're adjusting to the contours of other rhythms in our church life, so bear with us on that. But I think it's fitting that we begin with witness, given its new status in the rite, and because of its crucial place and need in the Church (that's "Church" with a capital "C") at this pivotal time in history.

But before we go to right now, let's go to "back then," and take a look at today's story from the Early Church in the Book of Acts. These are the farewell words of Jesus according to the gospel writer Luke. It's after Easter, after the resurrection -- and it's not totally clear from the text whether these verses are the summation of several conversations over those forty days -- when Jesus would appear to the disciples from time to time, and he would talk with them, and eat with them, and show in many ways (not specified in the text) that he was indeed physically alive -- or if this is the last of those conversations. I expect this was stuff that needed to be repeated for the disciples to get it. They had to be jarred out of the wonder of the resurrection and pushed into what was next for them; they needed a fire lit under them and in their hearts to get that this was news that needed to be shared.

And Jesus says two things to the disciples during this precious, transitional time -- the time between the triumphal ending of Jesus' ministry on earth and the wild, turmoil-filled, risk-taking period of his disciples' launch into the world on his behalf.

The first thing he says is, "Wait. Wait here in Jerusalem. Wait for God to send what has been promised."

That can be hard to do -- waiting. When you're chomping at the bit to see something done, when you're uncomfortable with the state of things, when something so good is coming, and when you're used to being a person of action, waiting can be the hardest thing.

Just over ten years ago I was making a move to a new church. I was seven months pregnant when I had my intake interview, eight months pregnant on moving day. For me, the word "transition" had more than one meaning. Having taken my birthing classes, and looking forward to Katie's entry into the world, I had much in mind the transition phase of labor. And it was a helpful image for pastoral and congregational transition, that I have kept in mind ever since that year when it had special significance. Any moms here remember giving birth? (I hope so!) Any of you remember what they tell you about the transition phase? For you men out there, I'm talking about that (usually!) mercifully brief period in labor when the diameter of the cervix goes from 7 centimeters to 10 centimeters. It's when things often get the hardest, when the contractions take it up a notch (or several notches) -- and some of you dads who were blessed to be present with your wives in the delivery room probably have some strong memories of that particular time. I've heard a few comedians have fun with their stories, of the transformation that their beloved ones underwent -- but I won't go there. Let me just say that sometimes the training goes out of the head when the reality of pain hits. And we need to be reminded - - and that's the coach's role, or the nurse's, or the midwife's -- to say, "Breathe. Don't push. Just breathe."

Let me tell you, that can be the toughest part of any transition -- not pushing, just waiting. It's an act of faith, trusting that there's a baby -- or some form of new life -- at the end of that hard process, and not pushing for it. Every fiber of your being may want to push, but you have to breathe and wait. Otherwise, you do terrible damage (and with a baby, you don't want to do damage!) -- to mother and child alike. You have to wait until that measurement of 10 centimeters comes. And there's precious opportunity in that waiting time, hard as it is, because it gets you ready for what's next.

In the case of Jesus' teaching with his disciples, what was next was the Holy Spirit. It was gonna set them on fire. It was gonna burn in their hearts. It was going to blast away all their timidity and give life to a new thing, a community of believers that could move mountains with their faith, that would bring healing and hope and turn the world upside down.

And it was worth waiting for.

Waiting is an important part of the Christian life. It can teach us humility and make us go deeper. It can teach us to listen instead of talking so much, and adding to the noise and bustle and stress around us. It can give us space to reflect on where God has been and what God has been teaching us up to this point, so that we can really be ready when the Spirit and the call comes -- ready to be bold, ready to take risks, ready to grow.

Perhaps today you are waiting for something -- for an answer to prayer or for a door to open. If it's your time to wait, be patient with it. Accept the time as a gift, and as an invitation to go deep.

On the other hand, some folks use waiting as an excuse, as a cover for timidity or shallow discipleship. There's got to be a balance in this, or else, if you wait too long, the call of the Spirit will come as a kick in the pants!

Jesus said, "Wait." But he also made a promise that there was something to wait for, and invited his followers to be ready and open for the Holy Spirit. And that means a different kind of waiting. It's an expectant, getting-spiritually-prepared kind of waiting.

One of my favorite reflections about worship is from Catholic writer Annie Dillard (and I expect you'll hear me quote it more than once!). In her book *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, she writes:

Why do we people in churches seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute?... On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping God may wake someday and take offense, or the waking God may draw us out to where we can never return.

(from Teaching a Stone to Talk, 1982)

What we worshipfully wait for is not a tame God. What we wait for is meant to turn us upside down. And if we're transformed, there's a chance that the world will be turned upside down and transformed, too.

I've got to tell you something, my friends -- and don't get paranoid when I tell you this: People are watching us. You can't fade into the woodwork if you're a Christian anymore. We are no longer in the age of Christendom, of state religion, when everyone was at least nominally Christian, and you could just put up a church building and open the doors and that's all you had to do in the way of evangelism, because everybody went to church. We're in a postmodern, post-Christian age. People ask questions. They're skeptical of truth claims. There's now more than one generation of people among us who has never set foot in a church. They didn't just turn their back on what they learned in Sunday school; no one brought them to Sunday school. They don't know the stories. They've never heard the hymns. They've never experienced the rituals. And many of them are hungry for something more than what they're finding in their entertainment and education and careers and addictions and acquisitions and relationships. And they're watching you and me. They want to see if this Jesus stuff is relevant. They want to see if

we walk our talk. And they want to hear our talk! They really do! They want to be listened to, genuinely and respectfully listened to, and they want to know how our lives are given purpose and richness because of our walk with God.

Now, there are some out there who are suspicious. They think that getting involved in a church is going to demand something of them, that it's going to take their freedom, that they'll be asked to turn their life over to the endeavor. And in most churches there are good-hearted folks who are on a mission to reassure others that it's not that way, that the demands are not so much. I've heard well-meaning folks say, "the Methodist church is about believing what you want to believe," or even, "We're kind of the loosey-goosey church." I've heard folks say, "Don't worry about taking classes; they're not required." There are folks in the church who make it their passion to reassure others that their lives don't have to change.

Well, let me tell you something. The reason the suspicion is out there is because it's true! Grace is free, but it isn't cheap. Jesus paid a price for it, for you. And Jesus asks for your life. If you really follow him, your life will change. And people will notice it. Following Jesus is not something you can just dabble in. Christianity is not meant to be a hobby. It is not an endeavor for mere intellectual stimulation, or comfort, or entertainment.

"When the Spirit comes, you will be my witnesses," Jesus says. "Your life will be a living testimony of who I am."

Don't water that down, my friends! Don't spin doctor it! Don't hide the faith that gives you life and helps you face the demons out there. The world desperately needs it. And they won't hear it if you don't tell it and live it. They won't find their way stumbling through the maze of options and the demands on their time and attention if they don't come into contact with a living human being who will befriend them and hear their story and open their heart to what God can do. They need someone who will be vulnerable instead of perfect, who doesn't wear an armor of protection and project a facade. They need someone real, who's waited in the dark, who's listened for the Spirit's voice, and who's been set on fire and given hope and made bold. They need you.

SONG: *When It's All Been Said and Done*

The pictures shown during that song were taken by Heather Perry and Laura Norris. I invited them to find shots that for them show the generosity of God -- a God who calls us to respond with generosity in kind. If you're a photographer and that subject sparks you, or the words of the song inspire you, I invite your submissions as we'll continue to build on this project through the course of our stewardship emphasis.

When it's all been said and done, there is just one thing that matters. Do we show in the way we live our lives a witness to truth and the power of love? And does our witness expand the circle of grace? Amen.

May the peace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you always...