

The Witness of Works

Matthew 11:1-6

Everyday in the news you hear stories about people who get caught up in doing the wrong things but every once in a while you hear a story about someone being rewarded for doing the right thing. I don't know if you remember the news report about the armored truck I believe it was in Florida that had wrecked and thousands of dollars were thrown all over the highway and hundreds of people grabbed as much as they could to fill their pockets. Well, there was one young boy who had picked up a few dollars, but knew in his heart that it wasn't the right thing to keep money that wasn't his, so he turned it in. That young boy almost immediately became a national celebrity. He was on a number of news programs and even made an appearance on one of late night talk shows. All of this because he had done the right thing.

Doing the right thing is not always easy or popular. Doing the right thing can place you in a position of ridicule or rejection. It's like the teenager who stands up for his convictions about drinking or taking drugs and feels pressure from his peers. Or the person who takes a stand about some injustice in society and feels put down or isolated from her friends. Doing the right thing can sometimes be a great challenge.

Well, the character in today's Bible reading certainly knew that. John the Baptist finds himself in prison for his righteous stand against King Herod. But John the Baptist was OK with that and I have to imagine that he believed the Messiah would deliver him. And so there he waited...and he waited, and after a while, he began to wonder. And he started to have questions. Where is this Messiah who will deliver me and all of the people of Israel? Where is this Jesus of whom I announced in the wilderness? Where is this Jesus that I baptized in the river Jordan? It seemed as though John was starting to have some concerns and maybe even doubts about this Messiah, this Deliverer. And he sends two of his disciples to ask this simple, but important question: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

That seemed like a reasonable question, as he waited there in prison. But that's also an important question for all of us...a serious question we all must

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raise and come to grips with in our lives. To discover who this Jesus is. And to ask how do we see him? We listen to his words, we hear his claims, and each of us have to ask: Have we put our trust in his words and his testimony about himself? Have we come to terms with our understanding of this Jesus? Have we resolved the issue in our hearts about our relationship with Jesus Christ, the Messiah and also the Savior? You see, we too have to have this personal encounter with Jesus, this one we declare as Lord of the universe, and seek him as our Lord and Savior. We too, bring our questions to Jesus and seek his deliverance from our sin and brokenness.

When the questions come to Jesus from John the Baptist, we hear his reply: “Go and tell John what you hear and see – the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news brought to them.” These are the glorious signs that the Messiah has come and Jesus declares that the evidence provides the proof that he is who is says he is. You not only hear his words, but people could see it with their own eyes. It was the witness of works in his life, the visible testimony of his life that provided the answer. Yes, the Messiah has come. Receive the good news and believe!

These words were a word of promise and hope for those who were present with Jesus, but these words also become a word of promise and good news for you and me. For this Messiah who brought such healing and deliverance, would also fulfill the Divine mission and go to a cross for our salvation. The ultimate witness of works would be done at Calvary as Jesus suffers and dies for the sins of the world. It was his work of suffering and dying on a cross that offered God’s grace to you and me, God’s mercy and forgiveness.

During the season of Lent, I want us to focus on that powerful message of the cross. Starting next weekend we will be looking at what it meant for Jesus to go to the cross as we reflect on that beautiful hymn – When I Survey the Wondrous Cross. And we hear his call to take up the cross and follow him.

But today I’m asking us to consider what it means to take on the mission of Christ. When we declare ourselves as persons who have received his saving

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grace, and seek to follow him as one of his disciples. When we take on that mission, then the witness of works will also be seen in us. Because we are called to take on the mission of the Kingdom of God. This mission of proclaiming the good news, this ministry of bringing healing and wholeness, this offering peace and hope, this mission of serving the poor and broken. For the follower of Jesus, his mission becomes our mission. Christ's works become our works, Christ's service becomes our service.

I think it's interesting that we sometimes miss this critical piece in the ministry of the church of Jesus. I mean it can happen very subtly, we may not even realize it, but within the church, we begin to see it as only a place to socialize, a place for fellowship, but not as a place to be in mission and ministry. And what happens is that we can focus all of our time taking care of ourselves, sort of constantly taking our spiritual pulse, but put aside the important work of witness and outreach. Maybe you've heard the story about the man who once attended a county fair and saw this woman leading a fine, well-groomed horse. He inquired of her: "Is that a saddle horse?" To which she replied: "Oh, no. Nothing can stay on this horse's back." "Well, then, is he a driving horse?" "No," the woman answered. "He was hitched up once and made kindling wood of the wagon he was pulling." "Well, then" the man continued, "What is this horse good for? Why is he here?" To which the lady replied: "It's his style, man...nothing but style. Just see how good he looks." The man had some further reflections that experience when he connected it to the church. He said: "Once I was in a church building and saw all these people dressed in their fine clothes coming into the morning service and I asked the minister – Are these people faithful workers in your church?" "Well, not really," the pastor answered sadly. "Do these people visit the sick and minister to the poor? Do they serve the Lord in reaching out to the community?" "No, I'm afraid not," the pastor replied. The man thought to himself, Just like that horse...I guess that's style, nothing but style.

Well, we're not that our fellowship isn't important, that our need to support one another and encourage one another isn't vital for our spiritual life. And certainly we celebrate the many outreaches and ministries that we are involved

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in as a church, but it's a very important reminder that ultimately this is what gives validity to our faith. This witness of works. I want to follow the Christ who came not to be served, but to serve. The great Albert Schweitzer put it like this: "Jesus does not preach the inactive ethics of perfecting the self alone, but active, enthusiastic love of one's neighbor." And certainly Schweitzer carried that out in the living of his life.

And so all of us have to ask ourselves this important question: "Where is God calling me to serve? What are the works that God is leading me to?" We know there are hurting people in our communities. We know there are lonely people living alone or in a nursing home. We know there are youth and young people who are struggling to make sense out this world, we know we are living in a world of trouble and suffering. Who are the hungry, the sick, the hurting, the broken, that we are called to reach with God's love and grace? I pray that we don't become so self-absorbed that we miss out on God's kingdom goals. I know that sometimes the task seems large and the work overwhelming, and sometimes we don't know where to begin, but you know it is often in the everyday acts of caring and reaching out that can begin to make a difference.

When a woman by the name of Sudie Black died, she was mourned by hundreds of people who didn't even know her last name. Sudie had lived in a small apartment over a pharmacy in a commercial section of Washington, D.C. She had lived there for 35 years and it was said that Sudie never met a stranger. When the word spread that she had died of cancer at the age of 67, so many people that she had befriended returned to the restaurant she often visited to talk about the way she had helped them. One successful business man spoke about the day he had arrived in Washington with only a dollar in his pocket. He was 19 years old and came into the restaurant, to spend his last dollar on a hot meal. Sudie who was sitting nearby offered to pay for his dinner. You see, the bill came to 65 cents, this was 1945. But again and again, men and women, now much older told of how Sudie had helped them. Helped them not only with meals, but also helping know which bus to ride, finding a place to live, finding a job. So many acts of caring. And now at the memorial service held in a nearby church, filled with hundreds of people, so many special memories were shared.

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They was story after story of how this lady had spent her lifetime, ministering in modest ways to people who were in need. Sudie Black was a humble, sincere Christian woman who ministered in the name of Jesus with the witness of works. Following Christ, doing his mission, serving others in Jesus' name.

And maybe we can begin to understand what Jesus meant when he said to his followers shortly before his death: "I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do, and in fact, will do greater works than these..." Why? Because the ministry of Jesus would be carried on by countless witnesses. Persons who would be willing to count the cost, persons who would be willing to take up the cross and follow Jesus. That becomes the evidence of our faith...it is the witness of our works. As Paul said to the Ephesians: "We are created in Christ Jesus for good works."

We are currently in our season of confirmation classes, and we have a number of young people learning about the Christian faith and how that faith can become real in their lives. I heard about a pastor who was teaching a confirmation class who asked his class this question: What do you think is the most important part of the church building? He expected the young people to say, the altar, or the pulpit, or the baptismal font. But almost immediately one of the children replied: "I think the most important part of the church is the exit." The pastor wondered if this kid's response had anything to do with his long sermons. "Why", he asked, "is the exit so important?" The child replied: "Because, only after we leave the church building do we get to do what we are supposed to be doing – serving other people." It's the message you see when you leave the church parking lot. "Entering God's mission field."

Jesus calls you and me to carry out God's mission – a mission of God's work in a troubled world. A witness of works that can change people's lives with our acts of caring and serving. Our call is to a life surrendered to the will of God, a life that testifies to the goodness and grace of God...A life that makes a difference in people's lives. The living of our faith...it is the witness of works.