

Testimony of God
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1 John 5:9-13

⁹If we receive human testimony, the testimony of God is greater; for this is the testimony of God that he has testified to his Son. ¹⁰Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts. Those who do not believe in God have made him a liar by not believing in the testimony that God has given concerning his Son. ¹¹And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. ¹²Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

¹³I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.

John 17:6-19

⁶“I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; ⁸for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. ⁹I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. ¹⁰All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. ¹¹And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. ¹²While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. ¹³But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. ¹⁴I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁵I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. ¹⁶They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁷Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

In newsletters and here, during the time for children, I have talked about how we can see God in places beyond church and the Bible. I've even set a jar out in back where you can share the un-church-y places you've seen God. I do firmly believe that God is so big and so great that we only need look to see God in ordinary days and in ordinary ways. But, the defining characteristic that sets us apart as Christians is that we believe, among all those other signs of God's presence, that Jesus is the truest, purest witness to God, that Jesus alone is sufficient and complete, that Jesus, in all he did and all he was and all he loved, points perfectly to who and how God is.

In saying the testimony of God is greater, as we read in 1 John, God is not negating human testimony or suggesting it is worthless. After all, God thinks so highly of God's beloved creation of humankind that God came to us as one of us. What John testifies to is simply that God, and God's testimony, are greater. The Hebrew people, the people of Israel, knew this, declaring that God is too

great for mere humans to speak, or write, God's name. Instead, God's name is written as G-d and a variety of names for God are used in place - Elohim, El Shaddai, and Yahweh, to name but a few. We, too, believe that God is greater and so is God's testimony.

And what is God's testimony? We read in 1 John 5:11: "And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son." John 17 reiterates this through Jesus' own words:

Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.

Jesus is from God and all he does is from and of God. If we believe this, then God's testimony is in our hearts. And, if we believe this, then we are inheritors of the prayer Jesus prays for his disciples and the sanctification he requests is for us, as well. This sanctification implies holiness, but not holiness as perfection as we might presume. That which is holy means that which is set apart for God's purposes, for God's use.

The central theme of yesterday's retreat around Making Meaning was that God has given purpose to each of our lives. We are called to respond to this gift by remaining open to God's leading hand throughout our lives. Part of this response ties directly to our reading from John. As we grow in years and wisdom and spirituality, we hope and aim to be more and more *in* the world but not of the world. As we strive toward this, we grow in sanctification, in holiness, in being set apart for God. This doesn't mean that we ever reach a point where our lives are perfect or that we become mistake-free. On the contrary, the testimony is that we proclaim that God shines through even in our weakest moments. Our faith is testimony to God's constant loving presence.

In so doing, we join our human testimony to God's. Even though God's testimony is greater, the testimony of our lives has meaning. Perhaps we relate to author Augusten Burroughs who says, "I myself am made entirely of flaws, stitched together with good intentions."¹ Yet, where we might dwell or focus on regrets and mistakes, even in those missteps, God sees how we are just right, exactly as we are.

In this way, too, we are inheritors of the legacy of the disciples. Today, we observe Christ's ascension into heaven but the church calendar recognized it on Thursday, ten days before Pentecost, the day when the disciples received the promised Holy Spirit, the day which we will celebrate next Sunday. That's ten days when the disciples, who could not predict the future any better than we can, grieved again their friend and master; ten days of uncertainty about this Advocate who Jesus promised would bring his presence among them while he was gone and until he returned again. The disciples were far

¹ Augusten Burroughs, *Magical Thinking: True Stories*

from perfect when Jesus ascended and the ten days in between didn't change that. We consider Pentecost, when the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, came, as the birthday of the church, the day when the disciples, followers, became apostles, those commissioned and sent out to spread the good news.

This work of spreading the good news was left in the hands of imperfect people and God's gift of the Holy Spirit affirmed that these imperfect people, to our eyes, were, in God's eyes, just right for the job. In the same way, in our own imperfections, *we* are just right for the job, you and me. *We* have been sanctified. And if you still have doubts, hear these words of wisdom on holiness from David S. Cunningham. He says:

This language is often misunderstood as referring to the doing of good deeds, going above and beyond the call of duty, or trying to be "holier than thou." But the governing idea of holiness is that of being *set apart* - particularly for God's special purpose. Israel is a holy nation, not because it behaves better..., but because God has elected it to be a light to the Gentiles. Holy water is not fresher, purer, or cleaner than other water; it has simply been *set apart* and assigned a role that distinguishes it. Jesus prays for the disciples [and us] to be "set apart" in this way because they must live in *the world*.²

We, too, are in the world and, on our good days, we lean more toward being *in* the world than being of the world. On our good days, we remember that we are set apart for God's purposes; we remember that we have a role to play, and that we were not made to conform to our culture. On our good days we accept the claim upon us and respond to the gift of eternal life by allowing ourselves to be sent into the world to share in the testimony of God. And, on those days when the world dominates our lives, when our testimony is weak, or even non-existent, God's testimony does not stop or lessen.

And God's testimony is both public and private. God's greatness is for the whole world to see and for us individually to experience. In speaking of how our understanding of God changes as we grow and age, Richard P. Johnson, author of our retreat materials, says:

We recognize that the God of our youth is changing from an ever-benevolent yet impersonal God who saved me from harm into a much more personal God who resides in me and allows me to "handle" the inevitable challenges of life.³

How God is perceived in the world is part of our call and *our* commission, part of our response as Christians. How God is perceived in us is just as important and just as much our responsibility. As we show God's testimony to the outside world, we must also look for God's testimony in us, for it is surely woven throughout our lives from beginning to end. To give our best human testimony to others we must

² *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 6*, p. 548.

³ Richard P. Johnson, *All My Days: A Personal Life Review*, p. 47

know our own story, we must know the ways we have seen and understood God to be in our own lives.

We are sent into the world just as Jesus was sent by God. And what does that mean? We take the story of God's love for us into the world, and, through our actions and our good intentions, we offer lives of faith, of truth, and, above all, of love.

Let us pray: God, you are, indeed, greater and we humbly offer ourselves and our lives to your purpose. Accept and use us we pray. Amen.