

## A Faithful Witness

Throughout my years in ministry, and especially at the beginning, one of my guiding lights in figuring out what it means to be a pastor has been the writings of Eugene Peterson. Just coincidentally, he's a Presbyterian, and as a pastor he served exactly one church for his entire ministry—in the suburbs of Baltimore, MD. He began there as its organizing pastor in the 1960s and stayed until he retired.

At the beginning of a book called *Working the Angles*, he says:

For a long time I have been convinced that I could take a person with a high school education, give him or her a six-month trade school training, and provide a pastor who would be satisfactory to any discriminating American congregation. The curriculum would consist of four courses.

*Course I: Creative Plagiarism ...*

*Course II: Voice Control for Prayer and Counseling ...*

*Course III: Efficient Office Management ...*

*Course IV: Image Projection [by which he doesn't mean how to produce PowerPoint presentations for Sunday worship, but how to project the image of being a caring, innovative, and above all, busy pastor]*

He continues:

I have been laughing for several years over this trade school training for pastors with which I plan to make my fortune. Recently, though, the joke has backfired on me. I keep seeing advertisements for institutes and workshops all over the country that invite pastors to sign up for this exact curriculum ..., a curriculum that trains pastors to satisfy the current consumer tastes in religion. I'm not laughing anymore.

(Eugene Peterson, *Working the Angles*, 5)

Peterson wrote that in the 1980s, and I can only begin to imagine how he views our present situation from his cabin in the mountains of Montana where he's living in his golden years. But this isn't just a recent trend. Evangelists from Billy Sunday to Billy Graham were experts at harnessing the mechanisms of modern marketing to fill tents and arenas. And Whoopi Goldberg as Sister Mary Clarence in the "Sister Act" movies used the skills she learned in show business to, as she puts it, put "butts in the seats."

Although there are some glaring exceptions, for the most part the church's intentions in adopting the elements of Peterson's four-course curriculum have been good ones. But it's a short distance from talking about something like showing genuine hospitality and making a worship service accessible to all, to talking about things like "amenities" and "customer experience."

Although the methods and terminology may have changed, this is actually something that has always been with those who proclaim the gospel. In today's reading Paul says, "[W]e are not peddlers of God's word like so many; but in Christ we speak as persons of sincerity, as persons sent from God and standing in his presence." Can we say the same about ourselves?

In this stretch of time between Easter and Pentecost we are trying to get a sense of what it takes to be a witness to the powerful good news of Jesus' resurrection in our time and place in history. It's a time that has been labeled

with words like post-modern, and post-Christian, and post-truth. How do we tell the story of Jesus in a compelling way in a time in which truth doesn't seem to matter very much anymore? And I've chosen Paul's example in his second letter to Corinth as our basis for thinking about these things. I called last week's sermon, "A Credible Witness." And the title I've chosen for today is "A Faithful Witness." And this will come in two parts: The first is Paul's faithfulness to the Word of God, and the second is his faithfulness to the people of God.

Paul says, "[W]e are not peddlers of God's word." The word he uses is one that can also be translated as "huckster" or maybe even "scam artist"—like a street vendor selling who sells knock-off Rolexes, or like the cheerful young woman named Emily who calls me at least once a week to tell me I've won a free week at one of her company's resorts. Paul says that he is not like those people: he is absolutely committed to proclaiming the truth of the gospel.

He describes it using some colorful language taken from his world. He talks about the "fragrance that comes from knowing [Christ]"—and that for some it's a good fragrance leading to life, while for others it's a fragrance that reminds them of death. It's likely that this image comes from Paul's experience with the sort of "triumphal procession" he speaks of. In the Roman world, when a victorious army returned from battle, they marched through the city in a triumphant parade—led by the officers and the soldiers and followed by the treasures and the people they captured. Those people were destined to be executed or sold as slaves. And the whole parade was surrounded by a cloud

of burning incense. So for some that incense was a reminder of victory—for others that same incense was literally the smell of death.

We may pull back a bit from thinking of the message of Jesus in such black and white terms – but Paul said it this way in First Corinthians:

[T]he message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God ... For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:18, 22-25)

The same message that is wonderful and life-giving to some, can cause others to take offense. But being a faithful witness means speaking the truth.

That's not always easy. Men and women who are called to the ministry of proclaiming the word—especially those who expect to return to the same pulpit the next week—can shy away from speaking the truth clearly. In other words, the temptation is always there to be a peddler of cheap grace in order to peddle to those current consumer tastes in religion.

All of us who preach the word and who listen to it would be wise to listen to the Franciscan priest, Richard Rohr. He comments about what he calls the need for "adult Christianity" in today's world, and the need to listen to the whole counsel of God. He says, "The Word of God ... confronts, converts and consoles us—in that order." We find the comfort we seek by allowing the Word of God to disorient us, and then re-orient us to see ourselves and the world as God does, and to recognize that the way to life follows the path of suffering, and crucifixion, and then resurrection.

In our present environment, we would also be wise to remember that just because someone is being confrontational it doesn't mean that he or she is being faithful to the Word of God. We're in a time when our culture gives extra points for demonizing opponents and making absolute claims to truth and righteousness. But faithfulness to the message of Christ also means embodying the character of Christ. That may make from some hard and even confrontational moments, but such words are always spoken in the context of love.

And that leads to our second dimension of Paul's faithfulness—his faithfulness to God's people in Corinth. He writes to them, "You yourselves are our [reference] letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all." In the context of all we know about Paul and the church in Corinth it's actually pretty amazing that he could say this about them. Because if you were to walk into a gathering of the congregation Paul writes to in 1 Corinthians, it seems like you would find people fighting over who was best, while some ate steak at the potluck supper while others ate peanut butter sandwiches, and others were drunk at the Lord's table.

When Paul looks at them he sees those things, but he also sees something else, "[Y]ou show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts." What he can see in them—and he trusts that anyone who takes the time to really look will see—is that the living presence of Jesus Christ is

among them. They may still be a work in progress—but it's clear to Paul that that work has begun. He is so confident in that, that he's even willing to say, if you want to know what kind of leader and preacher and apostle I am, look at them.

And by the way, he also says that if anything good has come out of his ministry it's not because of him but because of God. Back at the beginning of the passage, he asks, "Who is sufficient" for the awesome responsibility of proclaiming this powerful, holy word? And his answer is God makes us sufficient. In John 15, Jesus says, "apart from me you can do nothing." Any of us can only be God's instruments in the world if we remained rooted and connected to Jesus.

Whenever I preach from Paul and hold him up as example, I think about the fact that it might be easier for me, as a pastor, to identify with Paul than it might be for you—just because our job descriptions overlap a lot more. But because we are all called to be witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus, because we're all called to tell the story—whether you tell it in a Sunday school classroom, or sitting with a grandchild in your lap, or chat about spiritual things in a coffee shop or a bar... because we're all called to be witnesses, we are called to be faithful witnesses. That means being faithful to the message—not only to know it but to tell it as truthfully as we can—knowing that we can't control how it will be received, that's the work of the Holy Spirit. And at the same time it means being faithful to the people God brings into our lives—being

slow to judge and quick to affirm whatever we see of God's presence. As we seek to live with integrity, and to be faithful to the truth, and faithful to people we may also gain the confidence to say that God has made us competent to proclaim the gift of life.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

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