

“Testify to Joy”

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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1 John 5:9-13

John 17:6-19

“Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their heart” (1 John 5:10a). A testimony has power. I learned that my first year out of seminary, when I was an interim chaplain at a private school. I led weekly worship services at a school where chapel was required, even though there were no unified beliefs in the student population. We had Jewish and Muslim students, but the real diversity was within the Christian student population, where there were theologically liberal but liturgically formal Episcopalians praying side-by-side evangelical Christians who did not believe it was true worship unless there was an altar call invitation to accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior after each sermon. Within that last group, there was also the belief that women should not be pastors, so I was pretty much set up for failure before I even reached the pulpit. But something I learned is that when I could train students to speak in chapel to speak from their heart about something they believed in, something important to them, it would be a chapel service that moved everyone-- no matter what religious background they had come from.

This is my story. That is a hard line to argue against. When you tell me “this is my story,” I can’t come back to you and say, “No that’s not your story. Let me tell you how your story goes instead.” I cannot do that because it is *your* story, not *my* story. One time I had to testify in court on behalf of a parishioner in a former church. This church member’s husband-- who did not come to church-- had been abusive, both physically and emotionally. Early one Sunday morning it got worse; she called me after her husband had assaulted both her and their daughter. We called

the police, and I then brought her and the children to church to be safe and surrounded by community while the police continued to talk with the husband. Later that morning in worship, halfway through the sermon, I saw her husband enter the front doors of the sanctuary and sit in a back pew; The other pastors sitting up front and I could see him, but his wife could not. It was terrifying. He disappeared before the service was over. I reported the incident to the police, and later was asked to testify in court about that day. I shared what I had noticed that Sunday morning, and then had the experience where I was treated like my story was fake news, as the abusive husband took the stand next and wove a compelling story that made me sound like he never had come into the church, and that I was a liar. It was if he was trying to tell me and his wife, “No, that’s not your story. Let me tell you how your story goes instead.” It gave me a sense of what it must have been like for my parishioner all this time, to be made to believe by her husband her version of the truth was wrong.

Ultimately, the court believed the testimony of my parishioner and myself. I was telling the truth, and my testimony was believed, regardless of the alternative facts out there. In 1 John, the writer asks if human truths are to be believed, how much even more so is God’s truth to be believed! For the testimony God gave through Jesus is life. Life!! Whoever has the Son, has life.

True story: the origins of the word *testimony* go back to the Latin word for testicles, male reproductive organs. There was an ancient custom in ancient Rome when two men were making an oath to one another that they would hold “their own testicles as a sign of truthfulness while bearing witness in a public forum.”¹ Quite literally, a man making a testimony held his lifeline in his hands. But when we believe the testimony God has given us in Jesus, our eternity belongs to something even greater than what our bodies, male or female can produce.

¹Dario Maestriperi, “‘Testify’ Comes from the Latin Word Testicle” in *Psychology Today*, Dec. 11, 2011

To tell the story of God's love as made known to us in Jesus Christ is *life*. But it can be hard for most of us to testify to the power of that love. Especially here in the Northeast, where we tend to keep our opinions about religion close within our shells. We do not want to offend anyone, in case *they* don't believe what *we* believe. Add to that the difficulty of sharing heart-felt meaning when you and your conversation partner are not both fluent in the same language. We Presbyterians love to quote that phrase, "Preach the gospel at all times. When necessary, use words." But to be truthful, not many of us, including myself, are very good at living lives that just ooze with obviousness about the gospel's teaching. So, sometimes words are useful to at least say what we are trying to do here.

In John's gospel, Jesus speaks to his followers a blessing before he leaves them, before his crucifixion and ascension into heaven to be once again with God. Jesus blesses his followers with words, saying the words that God gave him, Jesus now gives his followers. Further, Jesus adds, "I speak these things in the world so that they might have my joy made complete in themselves." Wow, what a gift-- to be able to receive Jesus' joy. David Ewart, a preacher, said, "Whenever we are offered a blessing in the Bible, we might be tempted to run and hide - because a blessing never comes without a God-sized mission. And God-sized missions never come without a cost."

The Holy Spirit is at work with you as her partner, writing a story that no one could tell quite like you. Jesus-- the physical Jesus who breathed and walked and touched and ate and drank-- is no longer with us in flesh and bone. This Sunday in the liturgical calendar we celebrate Ascension Sunday, when the resurrected Jesus leaves the earth and ascends to heaven to be with God. What are we left with? We are one week away from Pentecost Sunday, and we know with that will come the rush of the Holy Spirit. But in addition to that let us be mindful of what Jesus promised us in his parting blessing. He promised that his words would be in us, and as we live into our faith, our lives will weave the words Christ has left us.

I think of Jesus' parting blessing in John as the kind of words a parent would tell a child before the child sets out in the world, whether to start college, or move to the United States, or to do something that would make them more independent from their parent's immediate care and control. On a much smaller scale, I sat among the parents and grandparents yesterday while my daughter took her belt test to move up a level in *tai kwon do*. She's been working hard and did well in the test. But it was interesting to watch how the other parents responded to their kids taking the test. I noticed that at one point in my cohort of parents, I heard a strange whimpering coming from two different parts of the room. I realized the mom next to me-- a friend of mine-- was crying with joy as she watched her daughter accomplish each of the tasks needed to earn her next belt. Across on the other side of the parent section, another mom was crying softly. This mom was watching the anguish spread across *her* daughter's face as her daughter tried twice to break a board but could not kick through, which meant this child would not earn her belt. These whimpers were in stereo-- one of joy, the other of sorrow, as echos of one another. Before the test, my friend-- the one with joyful tears-- told me, "I am so nervous. I am more terrified than I've been for anything I have ever tried out for." To give you perspective, this woman plays an instrument for the New York Philharmonic! She's tried for a lot of things! It was as if for each of these parents, this belt test would be a marker for whether or not their kid would grow to be okay in the world.

I like to think that God has more perspective. After all, Puerto Rico still doesn't have power!² And I have been the parent of the child who succeeds, and I have been the parent of the child who fails. I have seen that she has learned as much from her failures as she has from her successes. A Jewish child psychologist wrote a book called *The Blessing*

² As of May 13, 2018, Puerto Rico still has 11% of residents without power following a devastating tropical storm over 6 months ago.

*of a B-*³ in which she reminds families that our failures will not make us perfect, but they will make us better, more resilient human beings.

But I admit there is that part of me that always misses on Mother's Day having my mom there, both to help absorb my pain and sorrow, and to also amplify my joy, in stereo. Some may still have their mothers alive but miss that connection because they did not get it from their parents. And I know Mother's Day is hard for several people for as other reasons too as well.

But as Jesus reminded his followers in his speech before leaving, God has already given us the things we need to be okay. Not okay in the sense that devastating things will never happen to us. But okay in the truth that as we live our lives, God will be present in the stories, the living testimonies, we create. By coming to live in the life of Jesus, who knew love and loss, sorrow and joy, fear and friendship, dancing and dying, God came to know more fully the kinds of material we would use for our own stories. God has mothered us to the point where we can launch and be okay in the world.

Your life is a living testimony to how God's love is at work in your story. No one, not even God, can tell it quite like you can. So, have you figured out what you are going to say?

³ Wendy Mogul, *The Blessing of a B-: Using Jewish Teachings to Raise Resilient Teenagers*