

Intro Hook:

You Matter and Are Loved Stories of Concrete Action...

Acts 1:1-11

Acts is now understood to be the second half of a larger story which begins in the Gospel of Luke. Written by the same author, who was excellent in Greek, and highly educated in the literature and rhetoric of the ancient Classical World... the climactic end of the story of Jesus is not his death and resurrection, but the continuation of the Church. The book of Acts ends, without a lot of hoopla, in a narrative way that introduces the continuation of the Church – what we do today – as the next chapters of the unfolding story. It's not history, or a story – it's our story.

Here Jesus teaching and encourages those who follow him for 40 days before leaving. In a sense, it's like a bird pushing little ones out of the nest to fly on their own, or parents delivering their child to college.

The disciples still have much to learn, for they ask Jesus when he's going to Restore the Kingdom of Israel, when will what was so great about our history and the past be rebuilt and made great again. But Jesus has already in the gospel, and also here in verse 3, been teaching them about the Kingdom of God – the present and future – God's presence of resurrection, justice, grace and nonviolent love – right here and now among the nations of the world.

Jesus then says that they are to be his witnesses - to testify to what they have seen and heard with and in him locally, regionally, nationally and internationally.

The word witness in the original Greek is interesting. It's the word *marturos* or "martyr" – for in early Christian history those who bore witness to Jesus of Nazareth were often martyred by the Roman Empire for refusing to conform to and condone the truth as the Empire saw it.

I grew up in a fundamentalistic evangelical Christian context in which I believe I heard bearing witness to be equated with sharing the gospel with the four laws so that someone else would choose to give their heart and life to Jesus. I think I heard that witnessing meant proselytizing and converting in one specific way. The word came to have a lot of baggage for me, as I was reserved and quiet, not quick to speak of my faith in words in such a way.

And yet I did bear witness to my faith in how I prioritized my time, how I treated other people, how I tried to make decisions, and how I responded to the world around me.

I Bible Study last night Chris Olson pointed out that the word WITNESS is both a noun and a verb.

Mark Dittmer spoke to us of the 12-step principle of "carrying the message" witnesses to a truth, a freedom, a way of life, in the way that you act, help others, move through the world...in a sense it's like holding the door open, through which you've already come, so that others might walk through it too.

Witnesses is more than simple passive listening (hearing what happens around us without comment) it's also an active listening (asking questions, engaging others, observing what's going on).

Being a witness is more than being a mere spectator, it implies participation, collaboration, and even innovation.

The early Christians in the Roman Empire were martyred not because they tried to convert others, but most likely because they would not participate in the everyday customs that involved glorifying the Emperor, condoning an untruth. Meetings of guilds, fraternities, worker unions, civic ceremonies, and religious gatherings were supposed to begin with the offering of something to the Emperor and Empire – a sign of obeisance – a profession of faith in the truth that came from Rome. You were to recite aloud that the Emperor was Lord and Savior of the World. Christians came to refuse to do that, they would not use the same title for the Emperor and for Jesus. They could not confuse the truth that they had experienced. That's why they were martyred, killed – for refusing to twist the truth that they had come to know.

Us Today

Being a witness to Jesus, and of his way of life, mission and teaching has to do with what we say, and what we do, how we spend our time and money, how we treat others, and how we treat ourselves, and also how we allow others to treat us.

Being a witness does involve sharing our faith, that we've put our trust in Jesus as guide and Lord, but it's not only in our words.

It also involves how we stand for justice, how we love our neighbor, how we define who our neighbor is, how we respond to injustice and violence, how we carry the message of transformative love that we have experienced, how we hold the door open for others that they might enter the kingdom of God here among us.

Closing Invitation

We are the ongoing story of Acts – even today as we're siloed in our homes in the pandemic of COVID 19. How are we witnesses to our hope that the Way of Jesus is the way to live, that nonviolent love is greater than both fear and retribution,

That the God of the orphan, widow, and refugee, challenges us to love the least of these not just in words but in action and justice,

That we are to love others as God first loves us,

That we are to love ourselves too – as God first loves us,

That we have tasted as truth about how we are all God's children, all worthy of God's love, all in need of grace, forgiveness and justice, all hungry for what only God can give..

We're called to not gaslight that truth, but to bear witness to the truth that Jesus is Lord and Savior, that his Way of life is the truth, the life and the Way.

We're called to bear witness...even when we're siloed in our homes, and as we eventually begin to return to gathering together in public.

“The time is now. The Kingdom is here. Change your life and believe in the good news.” (Mark 1:15)