

Can I get a Witness?

John 14:1-14

Acts 7:51-8:1

God of Ages past, ever-present even-now God, God who holds our future, we look to you. We look to you to breathe into us the breath of life. We look to your Son Jesus to teach us how to live. We look to the Holy Spirit to fill us with holy fire that we might be passionate and compassionate, drawn out of our complacency to be witnesses for your amazing grace. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

Can I get a witness?

Ok, so I promise I won't sing to you today.

This phrase did not actually originate with Marvin Gaye in 1963, but most likely has its origin in the African American Christian tradition¹, where calling for a witness came from an expectation that God had in the past, was indeed even now in the present and will certainly in the future intervene in our everyday lives.

Now I know that we are a bunch of crusty old Presbyterians, so I probably should explain that it works like this:

when the preacher tells the story,

or when someone gets up to testify of how they have seen God at work, the congregation is then asked if anyone else has seen or experienced a similar divine intervention for themselves.

Can anyone else claim God's presence at work in your lives?

Do you share in the witness to God's amazing grace?

The anticipated response is an affirmation, by clapping hands or shouting "Amen!" When the preacher calls for a witness, she is calling for affirmation that God is present, actively engaged among you, with the power to move and change and work wonders in your lives and that you know it! and claim it! and live into that reality!

So can I get a witness? Can I get a witness?

AMEN! Amen!

There! Now doesn't that feel good?

You know, we are created to bear witness to God...
we are designed to do that...
it's in the way we are put together—created in God's image—
It's in our hearts that yearn for God,
that are restless until they find their rest in God.
Our purpose—our very purpose in life—as it says in the Westminster Catechism,
is to worship God and to enjoy him forever.
We are created to point to God.
So don't hold back, let it out,
let your hearts sing and your lives ring out
in witness to the One who created you and redeems you!

Can I get a witness? Yeah!

Witnessing is an important theme throughout scripture.
Witnesses are always called to testify whenever
God's covenant relationship with humanity is evident.
As Christians, we believe that the prophets,
all the way up to John the Baptist,
bear witness to the Light of Jesus Christ—God's ultimate intervention in humanity—
and all the disciples ever since then do the same:
they bear witness to the Light.

One of the first witnesses you may have heard of is Stephen.
We begin to read about Stephen in the 6th chapter of Acts,
as the church begins to grow and develop.
It devotes itself to spreading the Good News in word, by preaching;
but in deed as well, by working for social justice:
taking care of the needy and feeding the poor.
It soon becomes clear to everyone that there is a need for some organizational structure,
so they identify seven men to ensure
the care of the poor and the widows and the orphans.

These men were the first Deacons of the church,
and Stephen is named as the first deacon,
and it's certain from the start that he has great gifts for ministry.
He's a guy brimming with God's grace and energy,
and he's very effective at pointing to God.

But he's none too popular with some of the people, it seems,
and so they stir up the elders, scribes and the crowds against Stephen,
and they bring him before the council.

Trumping up charges against him, they try to break his spirit,
but he stands before them with what's described as "the face of an angel" (v. 15).
He's given the opportunity to make a speech in his defense,
and he takes full advantage to speak at length
about the story of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph and other Old Testament heroes.
The gist of the story is that—
—despite the faithfulness of a God who walks with us and who never lets us go—
—humanity insists on doing things its own way.

It seems everyone is listening politely,
perhaps even nodding in recognition of the story of their forebears:
those stubborn people of the past who were so disobedient.....
until all of a sudden, in verse 51 of Acts 7,
Stephen shifts from portraying the people of a distant yesteryear
to pointing directly at his listeners (in these words from the Message paraphrase):

*And you continue, so bullheaded!
Calluses on your hearts, flaps on your ears!
Deliberately ignoring the Holy Spirit,
you are just like your ancestors.
Was there ever a prophet who didn't get the same treatment?
Your ancestors killed anyone who cared talk about the coming of the Just One.
And you've kept up the family tradition—
traitors and murderers, all of you!
You had God's law handed to you by angels—gift-wrapped!—
and you squandered it!*

*At that point, they went wild, a rioting mob of catcalls and whistles and invective.
But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, hardly noticed—
—he only had eyes for God,
whom he saw in all his glory with Jesus standing at his side.
He said, "oh! I see heaven wide open and the Son of Man standing at God's side!"*

*Yelling and hissing, the mob drowned him out.
Now in full stampede, they dragged him out of town
and pelted him with rocks.
The ringleaders took off their coats and asked a young man named Saul to watch them.
As the rocks rained down, Stephen prayed, "Master Jesus, take my life."
Then he knelt down, praying loud enough for everyone to hear,
"Master, don't blame them for this sin"—his last words.
Then he died.*

*And Saul was right there, congratulating the killers.
This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.*

And so Stephen became the first martyr of the church.

Martyr... the Greek word, taken directly into Latin, from which we inherit it in English,
a word that means quite simply witness.....

witness against the self-righteous and judgmental ...

witness against the fear-mongering and intolerant ...

witness against superficial faith and false piety ...

witness against idolatry and misplaced values...

witness to the way God really works in the world:

in justice and mercy, peace and forgiveness ...

joy and hope ...

witness to the truth of Christ as Lord and Savior ...

witness to the power of an ever-present and ever-loving God...

You see, when you serve others with compassion ...

when you work for justice and mercy ...

when you share your faith with passion ...

when you are bold enough to speak truth to power—

have courage enough to trust in affirmations

the world around you can neither understand nor tolerate...

when you take Jesus at his word ...

and take up your cross and follow him...

lay down your life in order to find it ...

You too become a witness.

So now....

let me ask you.....

Can I get a witness?

We are called to be witnesses....

Jesus sends us out as his witnesses to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8)

but I must confess, when I read about Stephen,

I get weak at the knees...

I'm not quite sure I have what it takes to be that kind of witness.

And with all the self-selected martyrs blowing themselves up

along with their neighbors in various parts of the world

I'm not sure the world needs any more witnesses.... like that.

Of course, there is a difference...

those fanatical terrorists bombed the Twin Towers

and claimed to be martyrs for their faith...

but a true martyr does not kill other people.

A true martyr—a witness for God—lays down his life so that others may live.

A witness for Christ operates out of love and not hatred,

faith and not fear,

A witness for Christ points to a God who is all about life and not about death.

I was thinking about these things as I drove around this week...

I was listening to the radio,
to an interview with Gene Robinson, as it turns out,
the first openly gay ordained bishop of the Episcopal church...
And Terri Gross was asking him how he dealt with
all the bitter invective and vicious attacks against him.
And he said something that caught me by surprise...
and made me ashamed how rarely I remember this...
He said
I try to live like Jesus...

Now that's a witness.

Stephen was a witness because he tried to live like Jesus.
He served joyfully and energetically and wholeheartedly,
working diligently for the welfare of others.

He yielded himself to the Holy Spirit
and that power lit up his face and lit up his life.

He was a deacon, a servant, a humble man...
but when given the opportunity,
he fearlessly faced those who accused him
and boldly spoke the Good News...

He lived like Jesus...
and died like him too...

Looking to heaven when the world roared with rage around him ...
and praying for the forgiveness of his attackers...
Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.

Now where did he - and where can we - get the power to live like that?

You know the answer...

The Way, the Truth and the Life...
The answer is Jesus, who said: I do not speak on my own authority;
rather it is the Father, who is living in me, who is doing his work.

Think about that:

Jesus acknowledged that what he accomplished in his life...
even the words that he spoke ...
were not his own...
but came from God the Father.

Jesus himself was a witness

If you know me, you will know the Father also.

And then - the most astonishing thing -

he granted to us—to all of us who believe—
the capacity for God to work through us.

He said: Very truly 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,
because I am going to the Father.

Ask anything in my name and I will do it,
so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.

Really? Do we believe that?

Dare we live like we believe that?

Can we say Amen to that? *Can I get a witness?*

Now I think—it seems to me—that we can never quite grasp the enormity of this truth.

Most 99.9 per cent of the time we are unaware of the way

God is giving us strength
and using our words
and shining through our faces
and touching through our presence
and loving through our hearts.

Most often we hardly dare to hope and so we do not recognize that it is the Father,
who dwells within us,
that is doing his work.

Perhaps this is God's design.

I don't believe that Stephen fully understood what was underway
when he gave witness to Jesus Christ.

I don't think that when this humble, grace-filled man fully yielded himself
to the purposes of the Holy Spirit

he had any idea that the proceedings were being witnessed
by an angry Pharisee named Saul,
who was holding the coats and congratulating the killers...

Neither Stephen nor Saul could possibly know

that in that witness the seeds were cast for a new faith to sprout...
the conversion of Pharisee Saul to Apostle Paul just a short while later...
as he was literally knocked off his feet

by that same great white light
that he had seen reflected in Stephen's face:
You see, Stephen's witness must have niggled away in Saul's consciousness:
as he caught a glimpse of a faith so deep, so joyful, so glorious,
and so unlike anything the world had to offer
that Saul couldn't get over it.
He ran right into it
and it brought him to his knees,
and then it set him on his feet
a changed man
the apostle charged to take the
Gospel to the gentiles.....

and the world has never been the same since.

Stephen couldn't possibly have understood what his witness would lead to...
... but God did.
God used his witness.

Jesus calls us all to be his witnesses... To point to him ...

To live like Stephen

To live like Jesus.

And I got to thinking, What would this church look like if we did that?

Imagine what might happen if each one of us individually
and all of us together

Took Jesus at his word and allowed God to dwell within us and work through us.

What would happen if every single one of us

threw aside our doubts and self-deprecations

and truly tried to live like the Jesus we claim to follow?

What greater works might we do here?

How much good could we accomplish in our community,
in our world, if we were all actively involved?

What would happen if every single one of us found one ministry—just one ministry—
to get involved in in this place - one way to serve here -

- one outreach activity to sign up for -

- one way in which we might give our time or our talent
so that God might work through us?

Imagine it! How many ways could we serve our community?

How many sick could find comfort?
How many troubled minds could find peace?
How many lonely lives could know love?
How many empty bellies be filled?
How many homeless housed?

How many around here might see our witness
and come themselves to follow this amazing and generous and exciting God
who promises to fill lives with purpose
and hearts with joy,
this God who promises to dwell among us,
dwell within us,
and fill us with the love, joy, peace, and hope of Jesus?

I tell you, if every single one of us took Jesus at his word
and believed that greater works than these shall we do,
I swear to you, even this beautiful new church could not hold us all!
My goodness, while we're at it,
maybe we could even fill the choir loft and the usher's roster too!

I don't know,
it would mean that we believe that God has in the past,
is indeed even now in the present,
and certainly will in the future intervene in our everyday lives;
dwell within even us,
fill even us with the power of the Holy Spirit
and enable even us to will and work for his good pleasure.

Do we believe that?
Dare we live like we believe that?
Can we say Amen to that?
Can I get a witness?

¹ CHAPTER 3: A CULTURAL CASE ANALYSIS OF THE WORKS OF NANNIE HELEN BURROUGHS
<http://etd.lsu.edu/docs/available/etd-0707103-152144/unrestricted/Three.PDF>

