

The St. John's Pulpit

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CAN I GET A WITNESS?

Gospel of John 1:6-9

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Who will be a witness for our Lord in these days of confusion about witnessing?

Bill and Marzell Rice live in Prattville, Alabama. Bill operates Cross Garden; a vacant lot filled with rough wooden crosses and abandoned household appliances painted with dire warnings. On one of several old rusting refrigerators, Bill has painted in bright red letters, "Avoid hell." Rice sees himself as a modern day John the Baptizer, called by God to warn the world about the fires of hell. If you lived in Prattville, Alabama and someone asked you if you were a witness for Jesus Christ, what would you say? You might answer, "Well, yes, but not like the guy with the painted, rusty refrigerators."

Our Gospel Scripture for today tells us about John the Baptizer. Some people call him John the Baptist so they can tell their children that Baptists dress funny and have weird diets. The Gospel tells us that John was sent from God to be a witness; a witness to the light. "He himself was not the light, but he came to testify – or bear witness – to the light."

Who will be a witness for our Lord? In our St. John's Church Covenant, we commit ourselves to God and to one another saying: "We will, with God's help, so live our lives that others, seeing the joy of Christian living, may seek to know Jesus Christ our Lord." Our approach to witnessing is to express the joy of Christian living. Joy is evoked by well-being or the prospect of having one's deepest desire fulfilled. Joy leaks out of you when your relationship with God is not right. Here are 3 ways John shows you how to be a joyful witness.

FIRST, JOHN INVESTED HIS LIFE IN A SINCERE COMMITMENT TO GOD

John the Baptizer pointed to the sin in people's lives and called them to be accountable before God. He called people 'a brood of vipers' and called them to repentance; turning around their lives. Yet, he was motivated by a positive vision. Like prophets before him, John wanted people to be sincerely committed to God and he knew spiritual cleansing was necessary.

Yet, most people have misunderstood John. They think he was negative; so they focus on negative witnessing and trying to change people.

One pastor focused on the negative. He became disturbed after learning he had been called to be pastor by a vote of 228 to 6. For the next two years, he did everything possible to please those 6. At the end of those two years, the only people in the church who were pleased with him were those 6.

John did not focus on making people like him. He focused on calling people to prepare a way within their lives for the Light of God appearing in Jesus Through his sincere commitment to God, John invested his life in preparing a path for people to walk in the light of Jesus. John was NOT the light; he came as a witness to the light. He knew that any person who continues to walk in darkness, pursuing self-centeredness or half-hearted commitment to God, cannot be guided by the love of God. The joy of Christian living begins in an open heart with a sincere commitment to God, a confession of sin and a repentance that turns you around to follow Jesus.

SECOND, JOHN POINTED PEOPLE TO JESUS

When Jesus approached John that day to be baptized in the river Jordan, John pointed people to Jesus. John encouraged his own followers to become followers of Jesus.

You were called to worship this morning with words from Isaiah 61. These are the words Jesus read when he announced the beginning of his public ministry. You follow Jesus when you are involved in proclaiming good news to the oppressed and burdened. You follow Jesus by binding up the broken hearted.

As witnesses to Jesus, you point people to Jesus. You cannot make another person open his or her life to Jesus. You can express your understanding of Jesus' humility, honesty, authenticity, vulnerability, compassion, dedication and commitment to God. You can offer God's grace and mercy to them and God's vision for redemption revealed in the light of Jesus. And, every time you express Joyful Witness to them, you point them to the Jesus you follow.

THIRD, JOHN LIVED WITH AN HONEST FAITH

After John the Baptizer was arrested, he sent some men to ask Jesus, "*Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?*" John finds new questions inside of himself

when he is confined and limited and facing death. Reviewing his life, he questioned whether he had pointed people to Jesus in vain. He had a question of faith that needed to be settled.

You may also have questions of faith, from time to time, that need to be settled. You may find yourself having to decide whether you will continue to follow Jesus.

During the worst days of Apartheid in South Africa, Robert Mansfield was headmaster at an all-white school. He insisted that his school's cricket team go to play against all-black schools on the fields of the black athletes. The Department of Education ordered him to stop; so he resigned in protest. Emmanuel Nene, a leader in the black community came to see him saying, "I must meet a man who resigns his job for this reason." Nene asked Mansfield if he was aware how many wounds he would suffer because of this action. Mansfield explained that he could not follow Jesus without taking this ethical stance. He followed the Jesus who came to unify people; not divide them. Nene agreed and spoke of the end of his life imagining his appearance before God. He said, "The Big Judge will say to me, 'Where are your wounds?' And if I say I haven't any wounds, the Big Judge will say, 'Did you agree with everything?'"

Jesus lived an honest faith. He prayed to God about the will of God and his own commitment. He grieved over Jerusalem when they refused to accept him as God's servant. He stood up to the powers who valued wealth more than people. Jesus welcomed questions in his teaching, responded to the doubts of Thomas and affirmed the honest desires for Simon Peter's redemption. Jesus inspires a faith that is honest, not magical or mystical. The joy of Christian living involves an honest faith.

Findley Edge was a 'John the Baptizer' in my life. Findley said, "Either you are a witness of Jesus or you need a witness of Jesus." He helped me see that we do not carry most of our sin because of a lack of knowledge or gaps in understanding; but because we disobey what we already know and understand...even about witnessing

Who will be a witness for our Lord? You don't need a painted rusty refrigerator.

You Need a Sincere Commitment to the Living God;
You Need To Point People to Jesus; and
You Need to Live with an Honest Faith distinguishing between knowledge about God,
understanding the ways of God and obedience unto God.

Jesus said to his followers, “*You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to all people groups on earth.*” So, let us go forth as joyful witnesses proclaiming “*Joy to the World; The Lord is Come!*” And, we are walking in his light! Amen and AMEN!