

Practices: Testimony

November 22, 2015

Acts 3:1-10; 4:5-7, 13-22

Our worship service today on testimony concludes our 6 Sunday series on practices that unify us as a congregation. Perhaps you are a bit puzzled by this topic, thinking that we don't do testimony here at Berkey. Testimony certainly is a word or concept from an earlier era in church life, and was and is perhaps more prevalent in other traditions and places than the North American Mennonite Church. As a word, it comes with a certain amount of baggage: testimonies in some settings were used as litmus tests for whether one was truly saved; and in other settings were looked upon with skepticism because it is easy to use all the right words and say the right things about a personal faith, but it is a whole other thing to live it. (Ryan Siemens, "Are we ready for the return of testimony?" in *Vision*, Fall 2009, p. 51) Mennonites in North America have also been much better at putting our faith into action, rather than words. But Mennonites also believe that words and deeds need to match; that what we say we believe and how we live are to be consistent. We are supposed to testify to our belief in Christ through word and deed. (Lois Barrett, "Testimony in Anabaptist-Mennonite Theology and Practice, *Vision*, Fall 2009, p. 74)

Regardless of what name we give it, testimony happens here at Berkey every Sunday. We call it sharing time. And during special worship series, we've also had people share about their lives in relation to the theme of the particular series. We haven't called it testimony; we've usually called it personal stories, or personal sharing, or stories of faith. But it is testimony; it is speaking about our faith and our lives, our joys and our struggles, and how they all connect to our sense of God's presence. Our regular and dearly held practice of congregational sharing is our regular practice of testimony, of offering to the community and to God the stuff of our daily lives and our faith.

And testimony is making a comeback in mainline churches and being re-claimed as a practice that builds community and strengthens faith. Diana Butler-Bass (*Christianity for the Rest of Us*), Lillian Daniel (*Tell It Like It Is*) and Thomas Hoyt, Jr. (*Practicing our Faith*) all have either chapters in books or whole books on this topic, and there are a number of books on preaching as testimony. It is an area that has received some attention in the last number of years as the church tries to re-claim practices that strengthen believers in a changing world.

The book of Acts is filled with many testimonies. The particular story that was read this morning actually covers the whole of chapters 3 and 4, but we just heard a couple pieces from that story. Chapter 2 ends with this newly formed and growing community after Pentecost, living and eating and worshipping together. They held all things in common; their community was growing by the thousands—the last verse of chapter 2 says “day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.” We have this picture of a community that is vibrant, cohesive and energized.

And then chapter 3 finds Peter and John going to the temple to pray, and as they arrive at the temple, a man lame from birth asks them for money. Very quickly we see that this new community of believers is thrust out of itself and confronted with the needs of the world. Peter and John respond to his request, not with money, but with healing. This creates quite a stir among those who witness it, and Peter then begins to preach. This healing could easily be interpreted by those who saw it as magic, so Peter preaches a sermon, explaining to them that this healing happened by the power of Christ, whom they handed over to be crucified, but whom God raised to life. The religious leaders, who hear him preaching, take issue with the fact that they are “teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead.” (4:2) So they arrest Peter and John and keep them in custody overnight. In spite of their arrest, many—that is 5000—who heard them believed.

When called upon the following day to explain by what power and in whose name they did what they did, Peter again speaks: “If we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead....there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.” (vv 9-12)

The leaders who hear them describe them as bold, but they are also called uneducated and ordinary men. Their words and actions identify them as companions of Jesus. The healed man in front of them is also proof that something powerful had happened. The religious leaders realize that they have nothing to say to refute what has happened or the words Peter and John have spoken. So, because they can't deny what has happened, they order silence so

that word will not spread about what had happened. But Peter and John say that they cannot keep from speaking about what they have seen and heard.

That seems to be one key to testimony—needing to speak about what we have seen and heard of what God is doing. It is experiencing God’s action and activity in our own lives, and being compelled to speak about it.”Testimony begins with God’s self-disclosure. Before we can testify to what we have witnessed, we need to become aware of God’s testimony to us.” (Lois Barrett, “Testimony in Anabaptist-Mennonite Theology and Practice, *Vision*, Fall 2009, p. 79) God first makes Godself known to us, and having experienced that, we can then make God’s presence known to others. That would certainly have been the experience of Peter and John, and of the man who was lame from birth. As they each in their own way experienced God’s presence, action and activity in their own lives, they could not keep from speaking about it—even when ordered by the authorities to keep silent.

That is what testimony is: it is speaking about what we have seen and heard. It is telling stories of faith, stories about our encounters with God, or God’s encounters with us. Perhaps one difference between testimonies in our time compared to what they used to be is that today, when we testify to God’s presence in our lives, when we speak about how it is we have experienced God, we speak not about an action that was completed in the past, but we speak about God’s on-going action in our lives. Testimony today is more about what it means to be on the journey of faith, what it means to be on the way, rather than about having arrived on the other side a changed person. Most of our stories of faith are stories in which we recognize the on-going nature of hope and joy and challenge. Most of our challenges, struggles, and temptations are not one-time occurrences, but on-going challenges that require our attention and the work of the Holy Spirit to keep meeting and overcoming them. Even in our joy over healing and reconciliation and restoration that has happened, we recognize the continuing work that healing, reconciliation and restoration require of us. A life of faith is a life of on-going transformation, rather than one-time conversion.

Diana Butler-Bass, in her book, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, talks about various practices of Christian churches, and addresses testimony as one practice. She says that testimony in our time is really about testifying to a spirituality of imperfection. It is a spirituality that recognizes the pilgrim nature of our faith, articulating “a wandering, digressing sort of journey.” “It’s a spirituality of not having all the answers, but living the questions.” (p. 141) “Testimony isn’t about

God fixing people. Rather it speaks of God making wholeness out of human woundedness and human incompleteness.” (p. 141)

As we tell our stories, we become more and more ourselves. As we speak the truth about our lives, we are able to understand more fully who we are and whose we are. Testimony reminds us where we have been and helps us to see where we are, which then can direct us into a future we maybe couldn't see or anticipate. (p. 139)

Telling the truth about our lives connects us with others who are also pilgrims on the way. Testimony ties us to each other. Every time we tell the truth about our lives, every time we risk being vulnerable with each other, we offer ourselves and our stories to our community of brothers and sisters, who are listening and hopefully encouraging us. When we speak truthfully about our lives, we do so for the good of the whole community; these stories become models and examples to us of faith and hope. (Thomas Hoyt, Jr., “Testimony”, in *Practicing Our Faith*, p. 92) Our willingness to speak truthfully also can be a testimony of encouragement to others; a model of faithfulness; an opportunity for care. I have certainly been encouraged at times by the testimony of many people here in this congregation; I've received the stories offered, the confessions made, the fears named and the hopes voiced, and it has strengthened my own faith and hope. Any time the gathered community gives voice to our common human struggles, we bear witness to the power of God to transform us, and we are encouraged to name and face our own struggles and shortcomings. (p. 97)

There is definitely power in the spoken word, in the testimonies we share with each other. But there is another side to testimony, and that is the responsibility of the hearers in relation to the testimony given. Peter and John said they couldn't help but speak what they had seen and heard. Their spoken message had an impact on those who heard it. The listeners had to decide what to do with what they had heard and seen. Some responded by following Jesus, by joining this community of people who lived by the power of the resurrection. But others, like the religious authorities, wanted to silence everyone. They did not want what had been spoken to spread, because the implications of this powerful message meant that the world would change.

“Testimony requires a response from those who receive it.” (Thomas Hoyt, Jr., “Testimony”, in *Practicing Our Faith*, p. 98) Testimony is witness to God’s presence and activity, and at the very least, hearing about how God is present and active in someone else’s life should provoke us to examine how God is present and active in our own lives. But if testimony ties us to one another, then hearing about someone’s struggles or pain should also draw us toward them. Testimony has the power and potential to build up the community; the community has to be willing to let the power of testimony do its work.

We here at Berkey are good at sharing our testimonies in sharing time. Indeed, there is a striking level of vulnerability to the sharing we do during worship. But what has become evident to me as I’ve heard from people who have shared in that way is that we aren’t very good at responding to those people individually after they have shared. Sure, we have a congregational prayer to bring all that is shared before God; we sometimes communally pray, “Lord, hear our prayer.” But how often do we talk to someone who has shared their pain about their situation during fellowship time? How many of us have followed up with them a few weeks later to see how they are doing? This is a difficult thing to do, but it is the other side of the practice of sharing and testimony that we hold dear as a congregation. It is the area of our congregational life that has room for growth and strengthening. We are good at taking casseroles to people, we are good at living our faith through deed, but being a listening ear, being a caring presence when words are hard to find—that is a difficult thing to do.

A number of people who have joined our congregation have talked about the vulnerability they have noticed here, and have named authenticity as a characteristic of our congregation. Brene Brown talks about the journey toward vulnerability, and how difficult it is. When she first talked about vulnerability and shame in a TED talk, she had no idea that so many people would be watching it. In a subsequent TED talk, she names the vulnerability hangover she experienced after having told the world that she had had an emotional breakdown. For several days, she didn’t want to show her face in public, she didn’t want to leave her house. She couldn’t believe she had just shared that kind of stuff with thousands of people.

When we risk being vulnerable with each other; when we risk sharing with our community of faith; when we give our testimonies, we also risk the vulnerability hangover, the self-doubt about having spoken up, about having bared our

emotions, or opened up ourselves. And when it is received with silence and avoidance the vulnerability hangover increases.

As a community of faith, we hold dear our practice of weekly testimony. As a community of care, we can practice the other part of testimony, and that is receiving what is shared with care, with compassion and with love. When someone risks sharing that exposes the deep pain in their lives, we can also risk speaking to them, sitting with them and inviting them to share more, letting them know we care and are praying for them. At the very least, with our words and our presence we can approach them in fellowship time and say, “Thank you for sharing that. It sounds like a difficult time and I will pray for you.” It is the 2 rails of our congregational vision of intimacy and invitation. Sharing time is the intimacy of vulnerability that we lay before God and our community; and sharing time is also the invitation to the community to enter into that vulnerability with our words, our presence and our prayers.

In the verses that follow where our scripture reading ended this morning, after Peter and John are released from prison, they return to their friends and told them what had happened. When the community heard it, they raised their voices to God and prayed. They placed this experience alongside the writings in the Hebrew Scriptures which told of rulers standing in opposition to God’s mission through Jesus. They pray: “And now, Lord, look at their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” (v 29-30) This community prays for more boldness to speak even though the authorities have ordered silence and that while they are speaking, that God would continue to heal and perform signs and wonders in the name of Jesus.

May we, too, pray for such boldness: boldness to risk speaking the truth about ourselves before God and this community, and boldness to receive what has been shared with the kind of compassion and care that says to our sisters and brothers, “I will walk beside you”; the kind of compassion and care that testifies through word and deed, that God is indeed here in this place, and present and active in our lives.