

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 23rd Sunday of Pentecost, November 5, 2023.

In today's First Letter to the people of Thessalonica (**I Thessalonians 2:10**), St. Paul reminds us that we are witnesses to the Love of God. To witness, to speak on behalf of, is our job and our joy. We are recipients of God's Love thanks to the witness of others, with the expectation that we will share that Love.

It's a pretty straight-forward relationship. Receive and share. Experience and share. Believe and share. And it's a relationship that has been going on for centuries.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem and grew up in Nazareth and died in Jerusalem and rose from the dead outside of Jerusalem and appeared to his close friends, and commissioned those friends to keep His Story alive and well.

And guess what! People did as Jesus hoped. And here we are! With the very same expectation of witnessing. In our baptism, we were commissioned to pass on the very Love that we had received. And guess what? We are doing what the Risen Christ hoped we would do.

That's a pretty good feeling, isn't it? To do what we are meant to do. To find our niche in the scheme of things. Remember this confident statement from Micah: "Surely the Lord is with us." (**Micah 5:11**)

Now, that finding, that discovery, that commitment on our part, is not a given. It's a result of others exposing us to the Love of Christ and encouraging us on a journey of discipleship.

Yes, a journey, with many stops and starts and more stops and more starts, but overall with continued intrigue in the Risen Christ. What is it about this Fellow that keeps us engaged? Why not just drop him? Maybe because he doesn't just drop us. He hangs on when we get tired. And he's right there when we plead for another chance. His sustainability is our sustainability.

Gee. I wonder if that's the way things are supposed to be. St. Paul referred to us as "witnesses." "Witness." It's a really interesting word. It's a noun and it's a verb. A witness – the noun – is one who proclaims – the verb. You are I are witnessing right now. We're keeping alive the Good News of Christ. By our

presence, by our conviction, and by our sharing, we are helping keep alive the Greatest Story Ever Told.

And, by design - God's design – others are receiving the Good News and passing on that Good News to others. Christ is Risen. The Lord is Risen indeed.

“Indeed.” That’s another interesting word. It’s not a noun and it’s not a verb. It’s an adverb. It modifies other words. “You run fast.” “The Lord really is risen.” Adverbs drive home a point.

You and I, on this side of belief in Christ, become not just believers, but advocates. We have a point to make, to pass on, to deliver, to proclaim, to witness. And we do these things in all sorts of ways, many of which we don’t even recognize.

But, others do. Others recognize when we’re sharing with conviction. Not idle chatter, but heart-felt belief. The kind of belief that sometimes surprises people, even members of our own family. “What’s gotten into you? Something is going on. What is it? First, I was worried about you. Now, I’m just curious. Maybe even jealous.”

Well, we don’t want people to be jealous. We do hope, though, that people are curious. Maybe even grateful. After all, conviction that the Risen Christ is alive and well just might be transforming us. We might not notice the changes, but others, even those closest to us, might.

To some, the subtle or not-so-subtle changes in our behavior might be welcome. “Finally, he’s got his head on straight.” To others, these changes might be disappointing. Maybe even threatening. “We’re worried about you. We don’t want you to be caught up in some kind of cult.”

So, how do we handle the response of others to our belief, our conviction? Well, the key here is that we don’t have to do all the “handling.” After all, we are partners with the Lord, who is perfectly capable of “handling” all sorts of things. From the Creation of all that is to a very slight modification in thinking. So slight, so subtle, exercised through the likes of you and me in ways that are intentional and unintentional, we might not even recognize that God is at work, much less that God is at work through you and me.

That can be a stumbling for us, can't it. We, as instruments of God's Love? Little old us? We barely understand our Faith journey. How and why can God use us as partners in the Faith journeys of others?

Well, there we go again. Wondering how and why God can do what God does. Why is that such a stumbling block for us? Maybe, just maybe, it's because we just can't get over the possibility – maybe the fact – that God would choose us as partners in building Faith in others.

Isn't it true that we are more comfortable working on God's behalf as part of a group rather than as a single servant? Picture God looking for volunteers. "Who can help me with this task?" Aren't we more likely to raise our hand if we see others raise their hands? If no one else raises a hand, it might take a few minutes before someone responds. But when that one person responds, others enter the conversation. And pretty soon God has a team. God can and does use individuals. But God can and does count on resulting teams.

One of the privileges of working on behalf of St. Christopher-by-the-Sea is witnessing a lot of hand-raising on behalf of the Lord. You all, we all, are a team for Jesus. He is our captain. He is the source of first our curiosity and next of our conviction and then of the joy that comes with being where and with whom we are meant to be.

Today's lesson from Matthew (**Matthew 23:12**) uses the term word "exalted" to describe what it means to say "Yes, Lord, I will be your servant" and "Yes, Lord, we will be your servants." Exaltation. That's pretty special, isn't it. You bet it is. We wouldn't be here if we felt otherwise.

From today's Psalm (**Psalm 43:3**): "Send out your light and your truth, that they may lead me, and bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling." That's what we're all about right here. As individuals and as a congregation. Hard to believe that the Creator of the Universe would pick us for His Team. But that apparently is what the Creator has done.

God's decision. Our salvation. And our privilege to share and to support one another in this incredible journey called Faith.

Service of Holy Communion
Pentecost 23 – November 5, 2023

Hymn 637, stanzas 1-3 – How firm a foundation

How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,
Is laid for your faith in his excellent word!
What more can he say than to you he hath said,
To you that for refuge to Jesus have fled?

“Fear not, I am with thee; O be not dismayed!
For I am thy God, and will still give thee aid;
I’ll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand,
upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand.

When through the deep waters I call thee to go,
the rivers of woe shall not thee overflow;
for I will be with thee, thy troubles to bless,
and sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.

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Blessed be God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
And blessed be his kingdom, now and for ever.

Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth.
Lord God, heavenly King, almighty God and Father,
we worship you, we give you thanks, we praise you for your glory.
Lord Jesus Christ, only Son of the Father, Lord God, Lamb of God,
you take away the sin of the world: have mercy on us;
you are seated at the right hand of the Father: receive our prayer.
For you alone are the Holy One, you alone are the Lord,
you alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit,
in the glory of God the father. Amen.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.
Let us pray.

Collect for Pentecost 23

Almighty and merciful God, it is only by your gift that your faithful people offer you true and laudable service: Grant that we may run without stumbling to obtain your heavenly promises; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

First Reading – Micah 3:5-12

Psalm 43

Second Reading – 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13

Hymn 316 – This is the hour

This is the hour of banquet and of song:
this is the heavenly table spread for me;
here let me feast, and feasting, still prolong
the brief, bright hour of fellowship with thee.

Too soon we rise; we go our several ways;
the feast, though not the love, is past and gone,
the Bread and Wine consumed: yet all our days
thou still art there with us our Shield and Sun.

Feast after feast thus comes and passes by,
yet, passing, points to the glad feast above,
giving us a foretaste of the festal joy,
the Lamb's great marriage feast of bliss and love.

Gospel – Matthew 23:1-12

Sermon

The Rev. Charles Rowins

Nicene Creed – page 358

*We believe in one God,
the Father, the almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is seen and unseen.*

*We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father.*

*Through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.*

*On the third day he rose again In accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father,
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.*

*We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.
With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified.
He has spoken through the Prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen*

Prayers of the People Form IV – page 388

Let us pray for the Church and for the world.

Grant, Almighty God, that all who confess your Name may be united in your truth, live together in your love, and reveal your glory in the world.

Lord, in your mercy. *Hear our prayer.*

Guide the people of this land, and of all the nations, in the ways of justice and peace; that we may honor one another and serve the common good.

Lord, in your mercy. *Hear our prayer.*

Give us all a reverence for the earth as your own creation, that we may use its resources rightly in the service of others and to your honor and glory.

Lord, in your mercy. *Hear our prayer.*

Bless all whose lives are closely linked with ours, and grant that we may serve Christ in them, and love one another as he loves us.

Lord, in your mercy. *Hear our prayer.*

Comfort and heal all those who suffer in body, mind, or spirit; give them courage and hope in their troubles, and bring them the joy of your salvation.

Lord, in your mercy. *Hear our prayer.*

We commend to your mercy all who have died, that your will for them may be fulfilled; and we pray that we may share with all your saints in your eternal kingdom.

Lord, in your mercy. *Hear our prayer.*

Confession and Absolution – page 360

Let us confess our sins against God and our neighbor.

*Most merciful God,
we confess that we have sinned against you
in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done,
and by what we have left undone.*

*We have not loved you with our whole heart;
we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.*

We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.

*For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us;
that we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways,
to the glory of your Name. Amen.*

Almighty God have mercy on you, forgive you all your sins through our Lord Jesus Christ, strengthen you in all goodness, and by the power of the Holy Spirit keep you in eternal life. Amen.

The Peace – page 360

The peace of the Lord be always with you.
And also with you.

Announcements and Preparation of the Table

Eucharistic Prayer – page 361

The Lord be with you.
And also with you.
Lift up your hearts.
We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.
It is right to give him thanks and praise.

It is right, and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to you, Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. Therefore we praise, you, joining our voices with Angels and Archangels and with all the company of heaven, who for ever sing this hymn to proclaim the glory of your Name:

*Holy, holy holy Lord, God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest.
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.*

Holy and gracious Father: In your infinite love you made us for yourself; and, when we had fallen into sin and become subject to evil and death, you, in your mercy, sent Jesus Christ, your only and eternal Son, to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, to reconcile us to you, the God and Father of all.

He stretched out his arms upon the cross, and offered himself, in obedience to your will, a perfect sacrifice for the whole world.

On the night he was handed over to suffering and death, our Lord Jesus Christ took bread; and when he had given thanks to you, he broke it, and gave it to his disciples, and said, "Take, eat: this is my Body, which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me."

After supper he took the cup of wine; and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and said, "Drink this, all of you: this is my Blood of the new Covenant, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink it, do this for the remembrance of me."

Therefore we proclaim the mystery of faith:
Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

We celebrate the memorial of our redemption, O Father, in this sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. Recalling his death, resurrection, and ascension, we offer you these gifts.

Sanctify them by your Holy Spirit to be for your people the Body and Blood of your Son, the holy food and drink of new and unending life in him. Sanctify us also that we may faithfully receive this holy Sacrament, and serve you in unity, constancy, and peace; and at the last day bring us with all your saints into the joy of your eternal kingdom.

All this we ask through your Son Jesus Christ. By him, and with him, and in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit all honor and glory is yours, Almighty Father, now and for ever. Amen.

Lord's Prayer

And now, as our Savior Christ has taught us, we are bold to say,

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy Name, thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.*

Breaking of the Bread

Alleluia. Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us.
Therefore let us keep the feast. Alleluia.

The Gifts of God for the People of God. Take them in remembrance that Christ died for you, and feed on him in your hearts by faith, with thanksgiving.

Communion

Post Communion Prayer – BCP pge 365

*Eternal God, heavenly Father, you have graciously accepted us
as living members of your Son our Savior Jesus Christ,
And you have fed us with spiritual food in the Sacrament of his Body and Blood.
Send us now into the world in peace, and grant us strength and courage
to love and serve you with gladness and singleness of heart;
through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Hymn 498 – Beneath the cross of Jesus

Beneath the cross of Jesus I fain would take my stand,
the shadow of a mighty rock within a weary land,
a home within the wilderness, a rest upon the way,
from the burning of the noon-tide heat and the burden of the day.

Upon the cross of Jesus mine eyes at times can see
the very dying form of one who suffered there for me;
and from my smitten heart with tears two wonders I confess:
the wonders of redeeming love and my unworthiness.

I take, O cross, thy shadow for my abiding place;
I ask no other sunshine than the sunshine of his face;
content to let my pride go by, to know no gain nor loss,
my sinful self my only sham my glory all the cross.

Dismissal

Alleluia! Alleluia! Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
Thanks be to God. Alleluia! Alleluia!