
Faithful Witness: Standing and Kneeling at the Same Time

By the Rev. Canon Cathy Zappa
Easter 5 – Year B

Alleluia, Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Yes, we're still in the season of Easter. We're still celebrating the resurrection and wondering what it means for us and how we might respond. The resurrection stories themselves suggest that one response, an important response, is to bear witness. "Go and tell!" the risen Christ tells his followers, over and over. "Make disciples, teach, and baptize! Evangelize! You are witnesses to these things."

But the million-dollar question is, how? How do we witness to our faith? We're all quite familiar with one answer to that question: Tell other people what you believe, and why, and why they should believe it too. Correct their errors, mend their ways. Chock up another conversion. Win another soul for Jesus.

In fact, it may be experiences with this approach that make some of us shy away from evangelizing at all. After all, we have Muslim friends, Jewish friends, Buddhist friends, atheist friends. And we respect them. Sometimes, we may even envy their integrity or faith.

Then there's the fact that historically this approach has done so, so much harm. It has cloaked cultural imperialism, and fueled the evils of colonialism and forced assimilation. One of the greatest sins of Christianity, says theologian Serene Jones, "has been its refusal to engage other religions seriously and with grace and graciousness."^[1]

That refusal, that arrogance, isn't limited to Christian interactions with other religions, either! Why else would we have so many divisions in the church? Personally, I recall, with regret, some of my own disdain toward some other Christian traditions. Or I think of my own interactions with Christian friends, who in suffering have expressed deep doubt, or made meaning with a theology that I found troublesome. In my discomfort and anxiousness, I wanted to correct or fix them. I thought I needed to defend God, or my view of God. But if you've been on the receiving end of this, you know how alienating it can be.

So how *do* we evangelize? What might faithful witness look like here, today, in *this* pluralistic society, in *this* political climate, or in the various pastoral situations in which we find ourselves?

Well, I don't have the answer yet. But I do have a story. *We* have a story—a great witness-and-conversion story, in our reading from *Acts* today, featuring the great evangelist, Philip. Note, though, that it all begins with God: an angel of the Lord addressing Philip, and Philip listening and obeying, and getting up and going out onto this wilderness road—where, *lo and behold!*, there's an Ethiopian eunuch, sitting in his chariot with a Bible in his lap.

He's an outsider, who has come to Jerusalem to worship and is reading Jewish scriptures. But he's also a eunuch, forbidden to enter the Temple. He's a high court official, *and* he's a servant. Which means that he doesn't fit neatly into any of the usual categories. It seems he doesn't quite belong, anywhere.

The Spirit tells Philip to go over to this chariot and join it. Not take over it, or redirect it, but *join* it. So Philip forsakes his pride and safety and runs up to this stranger, sees what he's doing, already, and asks a question.

The Ethiopian takes a risk, too: he admits that he doesn't understand, and invites this complete stranger to get in his chariot and sit beside him—*beside* him!--and do a Bible study with him. It's only at that *point*, in *the Ethiopian's chariot and at the Ethiopian's invitation*, that Philip begins to proclaim the good news about Jesus.

So far, Philip's witness has been less about describing or touting his faith than acting on it, and trusting the Spirit himself, and following the Spirit's lead, step by risky step. And then trusting the Ethiopian, too, and following his lead, too...

... even when he points to water and asks, "What's to prevent me from being baptized?" Philip doesn't say anything, but you can imagine the host of answers he's sorting through: *Well, you're an Ethiopian, for starters. And a eunuch. You haven't been through classes; you haven't been examined; and this just isn't how we do baptisms!*

In the meantime, the Ethiopian answers by commanding the chariot to stop. They go down to the water, *together*, and Philip baptizes him.

The Ethiopian eunuch, you see, is a witness, too. He witnesses by trusting that he belongs already, to God and in this church. He trusts that the forgiveness and new life, the identity and belonging—all those gifts of Christ assured in baptism—they're for him, too. And his faith leads to a conversion for Philip and the church, too.

It's an old story, of course, and yet it's remarkably contemporary. I've got similar stories. You may too. So does our presiding bishop, Michael Curry, as he tells us in his book, *Love Is the Way*.^[iii] One story, in particular, strikes me as a modern-day version of our Acts reading. It's in a chapter titled, "When the Spirit Reworks You."

It was in the year 2000, and Curry had barely moved into his new office as a newly elected bishop, when he got a visit from an Episcopalian named Robert Wright. (No relation to our diocesan bishop!) "Robert shared with me," Curry recalls, "that he was a gay man who had been with his partner... since 1983.... He had come to ask me a very direct question: As North Carolina's new bishop, would I support the blessing of same-sex unions and the ordination of partnered gay and lesbian priests?"

"What's to prevent me from being baptized?"

This was three years before the consecration of Bishop Gene Robinson, and these were painfully divisive issues in this country and in the church, as many of you will remember. For a new bishop overseeing a diverse network of churches, it was a landmine. Plus, Curry had his own history and upbringing and internalized beliefs to negotiate.

So he answered honestly, "Brother, I'm not there yet. Stay with me, give me some time, and keep talking with me." And he did. Robert hopped up into that chariot and rode with Curry! He stayed with Curry, because he had faith in him, and in this church. *And* he had faith in himself, and in the truth he saw: that he, too, was a beloved child of God, and that he, too, belonged.

In the safety of this hopeful relationship, and with the guidance of Robert's gentle yet clear way of love, Curry changed. He converted. "We all like to think of ourselves as paragons of virtue and intimations of perfection," he reflects later. "But none of us are. And I know that I'm not. We're works in progress, hopefully. That means we've got to grow and learn and evolve. We have to be willing to be wrong."

Curry's conversion didn't stop there, though. He had to act on this change of mind and heart, in his personal life, and publicly as the leader of this church. But he had to do it, he says, "in a way that respected those who saw things differently." He would have to learn, he says, "to stand and kneel at the same time."

This is, I believe, where we so often get witness wrong: convinced of what's right—of what is true or good or loving or ethical—we can forget to be loving and respectful in our pursuit of these things. We can forget to be loving and respectful ourselves. We can forget that we, too, are works in progress, hopefully, and we need one another to keep growing and learning and evolving. In standing for what we do know, we may forget to kneel before what we don't know—or don't know we don't know.

But that kneeling is part of our Christian witness, too. This is what we bring into the public square and the conflicts of our time: humility and faith, in God and in others. We bring our *own* commitment to ongoing conversion and growth—to walking in Christ's radical, risky way of love; and falling down, and getting up again.

And this, I believe, is the witness that our world needs from us. Not more yelling and finger-pointing and posturing, but more listening and trusting. Standing *and* kneeling. Leading *and* following. Being true to ourselves *and* changing and growing. And trusting: trusting in God, in others, and in ourselves, all at the same time.

[i] *On Being with Krista Tippett*, <https://onbeing.org/programs/serene-jones-grace-in-a-fractured-world/>

[ii] Michael Curry, *Love Is the Way: Holding on to Hope in Troubling Times* (Avery, 2020).

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