
Can I Get a Witness?

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The Second Sunday of Epiphany-Year C

We have always needed witnesses.

Peter's first recorded speech is about picking another witness to replace Judas.

They called Matthias, as you know.

They called Matthias because he had been there.

He had been there at the death and resurrection of Jesus. But, he had also been there for the life of Jesus. He had been there for all of the teaching, and the healing, and the prophesying.

In other words, he had experienced Jesus. Matthias had internalized at least part of the dream of living into a new heaven and a new earth that Jesus called the Kingdom of God.

The first generation of witnesses eventually passed on, of course, but the need for witnesses remains.

There just isn't any way, really, to talk about the truth of God in Christ without witnesses.

Listen again to what John says about God in his story of Jesus' first miracle at a wedding in Cana of Galilee.

You know the story well.

Jesus and his mother were guests at a wedding banquet. The entire village was probably there. Mary realizes that there is a problem. She tells Jesus that the bridegroom has run out of wine.

Jesus steps into the role of host.

He looks at the stone vessels normally used at the beginning of the meal for the ritual hand washing, and directs the servants to fill them with water. He then tells the servants to pour some of it out and take it to the chief steward.

The steward assumes that the wine has come from the bridegroom. He tastes it and chastises the groom for being inhospitable. The groom should have served the good wine first, when the guests would have fully appreciated it.

It's a wonderful story.

When we first hear it, we are most taken with the miraculous changing of water into wine.

But, then, it gets better.

We realize that it's not just about the wine. It's about how good it is, and how much of it there is.

The readers of John's Gospel would have been familiar with miraculous stories of water being changed into wine.

We read about them in our Greek mythology texts.

John is, I think, saying something else.

Just as we will see in the later feeding stories, John is saying that the grace that Jesus offers is enough.

It's more than enough, actually. It's better than anyone expected. And, it's more than anyone could have possibly needed.

Just listen to the stories that other witnesses tell.

They tell stories of a God who is like a landowner who offers a full day's wages to workers who were able to work for only the last hour.

They tell stories of a God who is like a father who welcomes home his prodigal son with a feast and new clothes.

They tell stories of a God who gives new life.

It's cause for celebration.

I suspect that's why John has Jesus performing his first miracle, his first sign of the glory of God, at a wedding.

Weddings are celebrations of new life.

The bride and groom are making a commitment to each other that gives us all new hope for the future.

You can feel it in the pride of the parents and the anxiety of the couple.

You can hear it in the gratitude that everyone has for the new life that the couple has found in each other.

And, you can see it in the eagerness of the couple to share their new identity with the world.

This is the new life that witnesses testify about.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is one of the great witnesses of our age.

We will celebrate his birthday tomorrow.

His background is well known.

He enjoyed a relatively privileged childhood growing up in the Old Fourth Ward. He was graduated from Morehouse College, and then went on to earn a Bachelor of Divinity degree from Crozer Theological Seminary and a Doctorate of Philosophy in Systematic Theology from Boston University.

When he left Boston, he took a comfortable job as the pastor of a prominent church in Montgomery, Alabama.

His accomplishments are well known too.

It was in Montgomery, in 1955, that Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a city bus so that a white person could sit down.

Dr. King organized the now famous Montgomery Bus Boycott and his life was never the same again.

He went on to receive the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964.

He spoke out against the government's handling of the war in Vietnam in 1965 and against the war itself in 1967.

He launched the Poor People's Campaign in 1968 and, on April 8th of that year, while supporting a garbage workers strike in Memphis, Tennessee, he was assassinated.

But, what is not always acknowledged is that, in speaking out against racism, and materialism, and militarism, Dr. King was talking as a Christian.

He was talking about the truth of God in Christ.

"I am many things to many people," he said, "but in the quiet recesses of my heart, I am fundamentally a clergyman, a Baptist preacher. This is my being and my heritage, for I am also the son of a Baptist preacher, the grandson of a Baptist preacher, and the great-grandson of a Baptist preacher."

Dr. King was telling the stories of a God whose grace is enough.

It's more than enough, actually. It's better than anyone expected. And, it's more than anyone could possibly need.

His witness is familiar to us now. We have internalized at least part of his dream.

I'll bet that, if you close your eyes, and sit quietly for just a minute, you can probably picture him.

I'm guessing that you see him standing in front of that familiar stone statue of Abraham Lincoln. I'm guessing that it's a hot August day in 1963, and you see him facing a large and diverse crowd that has gathered on the Mall in Washington DC.

Sit for just a moment longer, and you can probably hear the sound of his voice, the cadences of his words as he describes his dream.

You might even hear him call for a witness. You might even feel yourself inching toward a clap or an "Amen" or some other acknowledgement that you know what he is talking about.

Can I get a witness?

I realize now that Dr. King's dream was bigger and better than I understood when I first heard it.

It wasn't just about him, or people like him.

It wasn't just about freeing some of us from the oppression of separate but unequal segregation.

It was about respecting the dignity of every human being.

It was about there being enough for all of us to experience new life together.

This is not just his dream, of course. It is also God's dream. We know that now.

And, with God's help, we have made some progress.

Statutory segregation has been eliminated. Doors to schools, businesses and churches have been opened and the glass and marble ceilings in those institutions have been raised.

But, I think we can all agree that there is more to be done.

There is still an unholy alliance between race and poverty in this country. We see it in educational achievement. We see it in unemployment figures. We see it in incarceration rates.

And, we need to do something to stop the violence that is threatening our children.

I realize that the world is different now.

I realize that many of the problems we are facing seem like they are more difficult to solve, and that many of the questions we are asking seem like they are more difficult to answer.

But, one truth remains.

The grace of God is enough for all of us to experience new life together. And, there just isn't any way, really, to talk about the truth of God in Christ without witnesses.

So, who will be our witnesses?

Whom should we call?

Who will stand up and tell the stories of living into the vision of a new heaven and a new earth that Jesus called the Kingdom of God?

Who will stand up and tell the stories of a God who is generous, and trustworthy, and true?

Is it us?

Are we the ones?

If not us, then who?

Amen