

Grace and peace to you my friends and fellow sojourners from Jesus Christ, our risen Lord and Savior.

You may have noticed that I choose to call my oration a homily rather than a sermon. I know many have noticed because I have been asked several times what the difference is between a sermon and a homily. First, it is a fine line that distinguishes the two orations. A sermon is typically longer often exceeding 30 to 40 minutes or even longer. A homily is typically shorter, less than 20 minutes or more normally around 12 to 15 minutes. Second, a sermon is usually doctrinal instruction or reproof, and a homily is spiritual edification or moralization. The third distinction in my mind, and I did not find this anywhere else except that this could be a different way of stating number two, is that sermons are typically found where the law is preached and homilies are typically found where grace is the daily offering.

Verse 16 in our Psalm today says: “O Lord, truly I am your servant; I am your servant, the child of your handmaid; you have freed me from my bonds.” The first thing to note about this verse is that it has three parts and each part has some kind of reference to servanthood, two are direct and one is indirect. Second is to remember how important and how much servanthood was a part of Jesus’ teachings. Third is to also remember that Jesus walked the talk. Jesus served those around in so many ways from healing to teaching to washing feet on Maundy Thursday to dying and to then being resurrected. So, do you consider yourself a follower of Jesus? Do you feel like a servant? Are you at least willing to serve?

And then, one of several focusses of the second reading from 1st Peter is in verses 18 and 19 where it talks about us being ransomed from the futile ways we inherited from our ancestors. Now, in case you do not know, this “futile ways” is really a reference to the first covenant between God and Israel that ended up being about the law. Then Jesus came to usher in a new covenant that fulfilled the law and instituted God’s grace and love for all. Martin Luther said it this way: “It will do no good for you to torture and torment yourself to madness; your works accomplish nothing, but God’s mercy does it all; God has compassion on your affliction, and sees you a captive in such anguish, struggling in the mire and cannot help yourself out, God sees that you cannot pay the debt, therefore God forgives you all.” First, it behooves us to listen to Martin Luther, because he knows what he is talking about, after all, he very nearly did torture and torment himself to madness prior to his understanding God’s grace.

The problem for us is that God’s grace is contrary to our nature because it takes us out of the equation. We want to do something, we need to do something, or else we are not in control – and just like that, we are back to torture and torment. The ideology around what is often called “good works” and the requirement or need for good works was the focus for many of Martin Luther’s homilies or quotes, so here are two more. “We do not become righteous by doing righteous deeds but, having been made righteous, we do righteous deeds.” This is sometimes viewed as almost a which came or comes first, the chicken or the egg. And I think you know my beliefs. Another saying from Martin Luther is: “God does not need our good works, but our neighbor does.” In this vein let me quote Rabbi Ron Symons who wrote “We need to redefine neighbor from a geographic term to a moral concept.” This, my friends, is essentially the same answer Jesus gave to the question “who is my neighbor?”

Last week I briefly mentioned our gospel reading today. It is about two persons, apparent followers of Jesus, traveling to Emmaus. Only one is named – Cleopas. We do not know who the second person was, perhaps a male. Or as some speculate, maybe Cleopas' spouse. Jesus joined them in walking and talking and later eating. But the truth is that this is an odd scene. First, Luke is the only gospel that contains it, yet Luke is also the gospel built around Jesus and others going to Jerusalem, the center of the Jewish universe. But this is a story about people leaving Jerusalem only to then be pulled back to it. Second, Emmaus is only about 7 miles from Jerusalem. Now, I am known to do a little walking, normally very little walking. I am also known for telling people that I have only two speeds and that if you think this speed is too slow, you are really not going to like my other speed. As slow as I am, however, I think I could easily have walked this 7 mile trip to Emmaus in three hours or less. Theoretically speaking, this journey to Emmaus did not consume a significant amount of the day.

So, for a moment, let's think outside the box a little. Can you visualize that these two people, whether husband and wife, or two close friends, or even just two casual acquaintances, are in reality acting as examples of how Jesus interacted with others or how in more recent times people disciple others such as encouraged by the Navigators. They just moseyed along as they talked about life, current events, and this Jesus. And then another person joins the trip and the conversation who has additional information and knowledge that significantly improves the discussion. Can that happen in our lives? Absolutely. But that mostly depends on our availability and willingness to open up to and participate in such conversations. It is more often than not, after all, how God is involved in our lives. So, again, thinking outside the box, is it possible that the conversation before and with Jesus was, in fact, witnessing to God's activities in each of their lives?

Karoline Lewis' commentary picked up this witnessing theme by actually focusing on verse 48 which is 13 verses after our reading today really ends. That verse simply says: "You are witnesses of these things." So, I have two questions for us to consider. First, does that verse apply directly to us? In other words, are we specifically included in that "you"? Well, I think so. And if you also think so, then the question we have to answer is just what exactly does that mean to me, to you, to us, here and now. We also should note that it does not say "will be" or "may consider", it simply says "are." In other words, witnessing is not voluntary which could mean it is, in fact, a state of being. Second, if witnessing is a state of being, is it possible that we are ever not giving witness to God? Now, I do not know about you, but that is definitely a scary thought to me. And does that then give us pause to think about what our witness about God actually is?

Hear then the good news:

We are witnesses does not depend on our acceptance or agreement or approval.

We are witnesses does not depend on our readiness or our recognition or our responsiveness.

We are witnesses does not even let us try it on to see what it feels like.

Witnessing is not optional. Period.

Witnessing is also not an intermittent activity of faith.

Witnessing is not something we can decide to do one day and then resolve to take the next day off.

Witnessing is a constant. It is a way of life.

Witnessing is who we are.

So, let me give you one last quote from Martin Luther: “*The farmer in the field, or the farmer’s wife in the farmhouse, if they are doing their work by faith for the glory of God, are fulfilling as high and holy a calling as the pastor in the pulpit.*”

Do you remember the song phrase “Don’t worry, be happy?” Here is a slightly edited thought from Chad Bird on that same subject: “When All Have Given up on You. If the world has given you up for lost and washed their hands of you; if your friends have written you off and turned their backs on you; if even your family has disowned and discarded you; yes, if every single person in this world regards you as a hopeless, embarrassing failure at life, the God of all mercies does not. That is why Jesus came. Not to die for the righteous but for those whose lives are full of one failure after another, for God’s love never fails. In the end, it’s not about how many times you’ve messed up, but how constant, how unwavering, is God’s love for you in Jesus Christ.

Amen