

Acts 1: 1-8: In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning² until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.³ After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.⁴ While staying^[a] with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me;⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with^[b] the Holy Spirit not many days from now." So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"⁷ He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my

Jesus tells his disciples that they will be his witnesses.

That's a word that evokes certain connotations when used to describe Christians. Today is the 12th anniversary of two important events.

May 21, 2011. Anybody know what happened?

There was a Christian radio personality named Harold Camping who predicted that the world would end on May 21, 2011. He bought bill boards all across the country. And his message was basically you'd better get ready to meet God because it was all about to end.

Now the second important event on May 21, 2011 is that I got married, so yep, I got married on the day the world was supposed to end.

Ok, now that's an extreme example of witnessing – putting up bill boards with some claim of divine insight about heaven or hell or the end of the world – is often what we think of when we think of witnessing. The connotation is that witnessing means to try to convince other people to believe what you believe.

My senior year of high school, I spent an inordinate amount of time thinking about and worrying about witnessing. My youth minister at the time taught us that it was essential if we wanted to be "real" Christians to share our faith, and that meant, at least according to my youth pastor that the goal was to have about a 5 minute conversation with the hope of getting the other person to believe what I believed.

And there was always one question that we were supposed to ask in that conversation, "If what you currently believed was not right, would you want to know it?" The idea is that people who didn't believe the right things would say yes I would want to know if what I believe is wrong and then that would be your opportunity to tell them. So we had watched a video of some pastor who was teaching us how to do this and on that last question, he said, "In all my years of witnessing, when I've asked someone if you would want to know if you believe the wrong thing,

every single person has always said yes. People always say yes to that question and that's creates the opportunity to share the gospel with them." In other words, it's a full proof question...just ask it...the ignorant pagan will say yes, and then you can get them saved for heaven.

So after we watched this video, we were supposed to pick someone in our family to practice on. Now I should say all of this made me profoundly uncomfortable. I did not want to go around telling people what they believed was wrong, but I thought this was what I was supposed to do. So I decided I would practice on my dad. Now what you should know about my Dad is that this kind of witnessing is the opposite of everything my dad stands for. He is a devout Christian, but believes faith is meant to be demonstrated not talked about. And he believes true faith must come with humility, so the idea that I have some special knowledge and that other people have to believe exactly what I believe in order to be right with God is the antithesis of what my dad believes faith is supposed to be about. So when I "practiced" witnessing to my dad and I asked him the question, "Ok, Dad, if what you've always believed is not right, would you want to know?" to which my dad deadpanned, "Not really."

What? But the TV preacher promised me that if I just asked that question, everybody would say yes. And my Dad just said no. And this wasn't even "real" witnessing. I was just practicing...simulating witnessing with my dad and he was completely uninterested. But because my Dad did not believe in imposing his beliefs on anyone, including his 17 year old son who was trying to witness to him, he wisely believed that trying to tell me what I was doing was wrong was not what needed to happen – he trusted me to find my own path. So for a little while longer, I kept trying to work up the courage to witness to my friends who I thought needed to hear it.

And one person that I decided I needed to witness was an exchange student from Germany who I will call Mark. He and I had become good friends and we were going bowling one night before he went back home and I brought up the conversation of faith. He was one of the few people in my small town who was open about the fact that he was an atheist. He didn't broadcast it sort of as a show of rebellion but he didn't try to hide it either. I decided to tell him about a fellow classmate of mine who we believed had experienced a miraculous healing. Several years before, he had been diagnosed with a brain tumor and then shortly before he was scheduled to have surgery, the doctors did another MRI and found that the brain tumor was gone. We believed our prayers had been answered. I shared that story with Mark to show him that God was real because God had healed my friend and he said, "RG, I'm glad he got better. But do you want to know why I don't believe in God? My little sister also had a tumor – cancer – and I prayed for her. My whole family did. And she didn't get better. She died."

I told him I was very sorry and then I didn't know what else to say.

That kind of witnessing is harmful. I did harm to Mark. And I think it's tempting to move so far away from the word witnessing that we never tell anyone about our faith. We never invite anyone to church.

And yet, witnessing remains a central theme in the New Testament. So what do we do with that? Can there be something beautiful about witnessing if we re-imagine what Jesus is asking of us. In our reading from Acts, Jesus' last instruction to his disciples was to be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the Earth. It's the last instructions Jesus gives the disciples so it must be pretty important, but I believe the kind of witnessing we are called to has nothing to do with the way I was taught to witness in high school.

It's important to remember that Jesus and his followers were all Jewish people living under the Roman occupation. For them, the word witness, would have conjured up two images. Being a witness in a Roman court of law. Or being a witness before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council that determined if someone had broken Jewish law and should therefore be kicked out of the synagogue. But before that could happen, there had to be two eyewitnesses for someone to be removed from the synagogue. In Jesus' context and in the context of every follower of Jesus who heard the instruction to be a witness, that word would not have meant someone who has special knowledge of the absolute truth about how to be saved. It didn't mean you were an expert in what to believe about God. It was simply a call to share what you had seen and heard and experienced. Share about how Jesus healed the sick because you've seen it. Share about how Jesus offered good news to the poor because you've seen it. Share about how Jesus touch the untouchable, welcomed those unclean, and spoke against those who condemned others because you've seen it.

In other words, being a witness means simply sharing what you've seen and heard and experienced – nothing more. It has nothing to do with being absolutely certain about what you believe or about trying to convince others to believe the exact right things.

A few years back, Mother Teresa's letters and journals were examined and many were surprised to find that Mother Teresa, this person almost universally recognized as a saint, spent much of her life doubting God, doubting herself and her faith. In fact, in one letter she wrote to a spiritual director, she stated that she felt her faith was dead. Atheists pounced – saying that even Mother Teresa doubted, that even this great saint wasn't convinced there's a God. And yet, what did Mother Teresa do in the midst of her doubt? She took care of orphans and nursed lepers. She fed the hungry and clothed the naked. You see, Mother Teresa did not have to always be certain of her faith to live our her faith. Her doubts simply meant she was human. Her faith caused her to continue to live by faith even when she had trouble believing it.

And friends, I would argue that is what witnessing is really all about. Witnessing is about living our faith out publicly. It's closely associated with the word evangelism which actually means sharing good news. When I told my friend Mark that he can be certain in God because God healed my friend when his sister wasn't healed, that wasn't good news for him. Telling someone that if they don't believe the right thing, they are going to hell isn't good news. Instead, I think good news is what Mother Teresa did – feeding the poor, caring for orphans, sheltering the homeless. That's good news that didn't require Mother Teresa to be absolutely certain.

It's acts of grace.

It's acts of resistance.

It's acts of hospitality.

So what does sharing the good news look like for us? What does witnessing look like for us?

I think good news is having the youth room where the Wildcat Den, the Rainbow Youth Alliance, and our own youth group can meet. It's good news to tell all the kids of Milton, we have a safe place for you.

I think good news is every month having a team of people make lunches and deliver lasagna to Father Bill's. It's good news to bring food to people who are hungry.

I think good news is telling people that God is big enough for us to be honest about our fears, our doubts, and our insecurities.

I think it's good news to be able to come here every Sunday morning and feed your soul with acts of worship and prayer so that we may go out into the week to show others signs of grace.

I think good news is that we will always strive to walk in the way of love.

At the end of the story of Jesus' ascension, the angel says to the disciples, "Stop looking up." It's not really about having the mystery of eternity figured out at all. Instead, the invitation is to look outward – to look beside you and around you and to share the good news of Jesus' love and grace and peace right where we are.

That's what it means to be a witness for Jesus Christ. And I think that way of being a witness is good news for us all.