

1) WITNESS—What does it mean to be a WITNESS?

When you stop to think about it, the word carries a wide range of connotations, doesn't it?

- In simplest terms, to WITNESS something is just to SEE it—
Like you and I are doing right here, right now:
I see you—you see me—and we all see the room in which we see each other.
- Very often, however, to WITNESS involves a further element: To say what we see.
To SHARE what it is we are seeing by SPEAKING of it:
Here's what I see! What do YOU see? Do YOU see what I see?

BEARING witness to WHAT we witness is important; indeed, it is essential.

Nobody can see everything, especially all at once;
so, in matters both little and large,
we're all dependent on the witness of one another.

AND, in our mutual witness sharing,
we forge and strengthen connections in community.

Try to imagine a world in which a WITNESS meant only what we alone observed—
and about which we could only speak in an echo chamber to ourselves.

I CAN'T imagine a world like that, can you? Such a world is inconceivable—impossible.

- WITNESS has a further meaning in more formal arenas such as trials and hearings.
But the fundamental objective in witnessing at either of those is similar, is it not?
To convene the views of all concerned to gain the fullest possible perspective.
- From there, however, it's not a big step to WITNESSING understood as an interplay
not just of contrasting and conflicting perspectives—but of dueling perspectives.
Winner take all, or as much as he can get away with.

Witness as implacable, agenda-driven adversary—
where whatever there might be for all of us to see
is all but obscured by all the shouting:

MY witness isn't Fake News, YOUR witness is fake news.

What a tragic irony! WITNESS, an enterprise critical to our life and well-being,
is turned, by turns, upon its head into an engine of our own undoing.

WITNESS AND TESTIMONY as that which CONNECTS us,
becomes WITNESS AND TESTIMONY as that which DIVIDES us.

What we can't live without—the sharing of perspectives—
morphs into what could be the death of us—perspectives locked in bitter battle.
And here is irony further compounded—in common parlance,
the connotation of “witnesses” as “those asserting CONTESTING visions”
tends to take precedence over
the connotation of “witnesses” as “those seeking CONVERGING visions.”

- 2) As Luke tells the story, the disciples of the Risen and Ascended Christ have gathered to appoint a high profile, community-designated witness. They have eleven, but they need twelve. They USED to HAVE twelve, but the one named Judas has self-destructed. Observing the scene from the vantage point of our current preoccupation with Fake News; we could make a case for saying that THIS witness election is much ado about very little. After all, the disciples have 11 witnesses already—how much clout will this interest group gain if they merely increase the size of their cohort from 11 to 12? Furthermore, Luke clearly says that 120 witnesses are already there, gathered for the election. Surely they can—each and all—be called upon to counter any Resurrection Nay Sayers who might conspire to spin a counter narrative. What's the big deal? Why does Peter insist on this witness election?
- 3) In short, because Peter is not nearly so concerned with overpowering opposing witnesses, as he is with symbolizing the essential interwoven connections among a FULL COMMUNITY of witnesses—a community complex but complete—each witness a representative of one of the twelve tribes in God's initially chosen people—not twelve tribes doing turf battle, but twelve families together constituting a single nation—a nation itself chosen and called by God to bear witness to the world entire of God's deep desire and determination to gather its inhabitants, each and all, into a community of children who, by witness-bearing to one another, celebrate and share, enrich and extend the gift of life from their creator God. Peter is not about convening a cadre of witnesses that will simply have the loudest voice. What he's after is an entirely transformed understanding of what WITNESS means—to wit: WITNESS IS NOT about doing what we can to “win” at all costs, WITNESS IS about immersing ourselves in a life-giving dance of communal vision sharing.
- 4) To a culture whose intuitions are framed by battle-waging Fake News claims, Luke's witness-choosing story in the Book of Acts is counter-intuitive, at best.

But what we have heard today in the Epistle and in the Gospel according to John must, to a “witness as adversary” mentality, sound like meaningless mumbo-jumbo, listen:

- *If we receive human testimony, the testimony of God is greater; for this IS the testimony of God—that he has testified to his Son. Those who believe in the testimony of God HAVE the testimony in their hearts. And this IS the testimony: God GAVE us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.*

Say WHAT? Which public opinion poll will THAT influence, exactly? What case will it win?

- *Father, I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in the world.*

That doesn't sound like a witness; it sounds more like intimate love poetry! PRECISELY. For Jesus, for His disciples, for John the Evangelist, and John the Epistle writer, witness-bearing has primarily to do with testifying, in image and metaphor, to the vision and the fact that intimate, God-of-Love relationships are indissoluble—
Father with Son, Son with Sisters and Brothers,
Sisters and Brothers with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit Mother.

In agenda-driven attempts we sometimes make to bear witness to the facts as we see them—
facts that, by God, we're sticking to, no matter what your Fake News says—
In that witness, undertaken in a “zero sum game” mentality,
it's all but impossible to grasp a Much More Fundamental Fact—
the Fact of a cosmos composed of intimately connected communal relationships,
created in God's love, sustained in God's love, challenged by God's love.
a cosmos in which relationships are fractured by “make our tribe great” moves—
a fracturing that can ultimately only be mended through Resurrection Love.

5) That kind of love can, indeed, have a sharp edge—

it can call out the kind of witnesses-bearing that is hell-bent on division.

The disciples do that kind of confrontational witness bearing repeatedly in the Book of Acts.

Jesus, in John's Gospel, bears witness before Pontius Pilate to the truth

of a “not of this world” Kingdom, the likes of which terrifies Pilate totally.

What Jesus and his followers don't get into, have no time for, however;

is bicker battling over “who's news IS fake news.”

Instead, they bear witness to the truth of a mutually and freely shared God connection.

And they invite those who dare to blink their eyes and behold this Love Connection to join in THAT kind of world-healing witness bearing.

And so Jesus prays, before his death, resurrection, ascension,
and his Holy Spirit Mother sending
that his disciples will, while IN the world, be not OF the world;
He prays that they will be sanctified (not oh so holy, oh so pious) but sanctified—
SET APART—set apart for witnessing—for seeing and speaking—
to the truth of a world with God’s love at its core.

6) What does it mean, to be IN a world like ours—but not OF it—to be sent by Jesus INTO it?

What does it mean, as Jesus says, to “keep” what we have been “given”?

This is not a question to be answered by any single preacher.

Rather, it is one to which, in continuing Spirit-ed Conversation, we all need to bear witness.

I invite you to think on that, to say what you see, to ask one another,

Do you see what I see? What would THAT kind of witness look like?

This, at least, seems clear to me—the work of witness-bearing to God’s intimate love
begins In House—within, that is, the “Household of Faith.”

We need to practice resurrection—speaking truth in love with one another—
so, three questions:

- 1) How can we listen deeply, listen well,
to those in this parish who see things other or differently than we do?
- 2) How can we bear witness to what seems clear to us—but do so in ways
that give others space to consider our vision without being overpowered by it?
- 3) How, when our witness-bearing brings us into conflict with that of other witnesses—
how can we undertake that witness in a way not driven by the need to win a contest,
but energized by the burning desire to forge a loving deep connection?