

## The Power of Witnessing

I'm going to talk about the bible today, and our justice system, and the power of spiritual community. Even if there are things you don't like, hopefully something in today's sermon will speak to you.

Most of you are generally aware there is a New Testament in the Bible that contains the writings about Jesus and spiritual community after his death. There are four chapter or books in the New Testament that are referred to as the gospels and they are allegedly written by disciples or those directly in contact with Jesus during his lifetime. There was a lot of emphasis on the disciples in the early church and the importance of having direct knowledge of the man Jesus. Paul sort of fudged and said he had direct knowledge of Jesus in his conversion, which was after Jesus died but we will focus on the gospels and leave Paul alone today.

The four gospels are Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, in that order in the book. But the gospel of Mark is considered the oldest, having been written the soonest after the death of Jesus. Mark serves as a source of material for Matthew and Luke but the four gospels do not contain the same stories. Or exactly the same language. Each writer had his own perspective and most scholars agree, a different agenda. Not all the gospels have an account of the birth of Jesus and they have different accounts of his death.

Mark has a couple different ending versions but generally a figure appears and tells Mary Magdalene to tell the disciples to meet Jesus in Galilee. And either it ends there or Jesus finally meets the disciples, and chides them about not believing Mary. Matthew has Jesus appear to 2 Marys and he tells them to meet in Galilee. It also says, "they worshiped but some doubted." Jesus assures the disciples he will be with them always. Luke has a version that appeared in our Daily Word for Easter. After the women told the disciples and they did not believe, Jesus appears to two followers, not disciples and they do not recognize him until he breaks bread and blesses it. At the moment of recognition he vanishes.

These two go to the 11 disciples and Jesus appears to them all. He eats a fish, blesses them then leaves.

There is a theme here. Despite all the times Jesus said he would overcome death, no one believes either the empty tomb or the appearance of Jesus. I think this is human nature. We are used to believing after seeing. I would guess the early church had a tough time selling the resurrection because there was no “film at 11pm” to verify what had happened. Just more miracle talk.

The fourth gospel is John. John was most likely the last gospel written and its style is different and much of its content is different. It is more mystical and metaphysical. And yet, in John we find the most stories of witnessing a risen Jesus after the crucifixion. By the time John is writing, he knows there is a credibility issue with the teachings of this prophet Jesus. So he has Jesus appear to Mary Magdalene, but she doesn't recognize him and three times he appears to the disciples. The third time is the fishing trip and he asks Peter three times if he loves him. There is a lot of completion in that 3 number. The gospel of John even ends, “This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true. But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.”

There is a power in witnessing. Evangelical churches will ask for a witness, who will testify about the power of the Spirit in their lives. Unity is not evangelical and yet we look to the evidence of the power of our teachings to be demonstrated in the lives of those who profess to follow Unity principles. We want to **see** them work. Charles observed the healing in Myrtle Fillmore and then set about a prayer practice to see if it would work for him. **Together** they began the movement. Charles testifying not only to Myrtle's experience but also his own experience in business and health.

Our judicial system is built upon evidence of guilt or innocence and one of the strongest pieces of evidence is a witness. Even if science

shows how unreliable our ability to give reliable, consistent testimony about what we have seen, our judicial system looks to the witness to provide evidence which the jury or the judge considers in making ultimate decisions.

The outer world looks to a witness for a story. That is the literal meaning of witnessing in the New Testament. That is the function in the judicial system. Can we get our story straight? But there is more to life than the material world and the stories we tell about it.

Shared experiences form strong emotional bonds. Reunions are about coming together to remember the shared experiences and renew the friendships that gave us strength in the experience. Family reunions, school reunions, war reunions. In years to come this group of congregants, those of you who are active in the ministry that is not defined by the walls of a building, will remember this experience together. You will recall the first online sermons and services. The Maundy Thursday with “bring your own communion” and the Easter without flowers. You will remember the things that kept us together when physical distancing was necessary. You will remember our strength and our grief and our resolve and our creativity. You will remember together and in the midst of this, we remember for each other. There is a humor meme that says, “It is essential that not everyone is crazy on the same day.” We can’t all forget we are spiritual beings on the same day.

Spiritual community is living the Michael Gott song, When I Forget. “When I forget, will you remember for me? Help me see, what you see, when I forget.” In this process we are the believing hearts for one another. We lift each other up and remind each other of the beauty and the faith and the courage that lives and breathes as each one of us. Community draws us together even as the physical space between us has expanded in this time of pandemic.

Witnessing also helps us remember what is important. What is it we want to be able to tell others about this experience of ULV? John ends the account with—and a lot of other stuff happened but the world could not contain all the accounts of miraculous stuff. Each

gospel writer bore witness to those portions of the experience of Jesus teachings that resonated with him—and that fit within his perspective. More than the story lines, the gospels bear witness to the spiritual nature of love and acceptance and forgiveness and expansive generosity that was the mark Jesus left on their souls.

In the time to come, we will not all remember the same things. We will give different accounts yet we will bring forward the parts that are important in shaping who we are becoming.

We will witness in a way that reflects our filters and our values and our life experience. And the gospels do contain some of the same material—some of the same stories. What will we all remember? How will our accounts reflect our commonality and our values embodied in the spiritual essence of ULV? I suppose, that will also depend on how this experience ends up changing ULV going forward. We will not be able to go back to exactly how we were. I will be gone. The church has lived outside the walls for so long, how do we want to maintain that life when a life back in the sanctuary is again possible? What have we gained from this experience we don't want to lose? What will we want to let go of and not return to?

In the coming months, lean into the power of witnessing and the power of spiritual community. Listen to one another and listen for the common bonds. Honor the different perspectives and filters each one brings and allow those to add to the richness of the experience. Four gospels witnessing one teacher don't tell a single story but together, they testify to the power revealed through that teacher. Witness the powerful love that you are as spiritual community at Unity of Lehigh Valley and the love which shines through each of you. Be the believing hearts for one another.