

May 16, 2021

Easter 7- Rev Sally Sermon

Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia! Christ is Risen! I've wanted to say that in this building for so long! Last Easter my hope was to return here before the end of the Easter season. Well, you know how that turned out. But here we are, finally. Over the past year I've come to appreciate how important a building can be. It is the place where we bring to God our hopes, our fears, our joys, and disappointments. Now let me make clear, the Church is not the building. The Church is the community of God's people. But I've come to realize that the building that houses God's people can be a reminder to us of how God has been present in the past and how God will be present in the future. In a way the building is a witness, from one generation to the next to the faithfulness of God.

Being a witness means revealing the truth of God's life and love. Jesus is the perfect witness for the Father. He reveals God's truth. In the gospel today, Jesus is praying to his Father on the night before his crucifixion. He is praying for his disciples, the ones who his Father has given him, the ones to whom he has revealed the truth of God. Jesus prays, "the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you;" Jesus is God's witness. The disciples knew the Father's love because they had seen the Son. Through Jesus, the disciples knew God's truth.

But that witness doesn't stop with Jesus. The call to witness is passed on to Jesus' apostles. Before his ascension, which took place just before today's lesson in Acts, Jesus said, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." An apostle is one sent out on a mission. Jesus sent his followers out as his witnesses to the world. In today's lesson from Acts, after Jesus had left them, the apostles selected another apostle, to take the place of Judas. This person would also be sent out as a witness. Therefore, it had to be a person who could testify to the ministry of Jesus and to his resurrection. This is because a witness can only share what they themselves know.

The witness of the apostles is what we hear in the words of the New Testament. But this witness isn't just confined to the scriptures. The witness of Christ is passed on through the people of faith, through the Church, from

one generation to the next. In our Church, this witness takes the form of our Bishops. We claim that they are in apostolic succession. They can trace their consecration, the laying on of hands, back to the first apostles. Now there is much debate about how necessary this really is, but the reason we value this line is because it represents the transmission of faith from one Bishop, or Apostle, to another. In other words, the faith proclaimed today, is the same faith which the apostles received from Jesus. The Bishops are our witnesses to this faith.

But Bishops aren't the only witnesses we see. Our faith is shaped and grows as we see the witness of others, as we see the life and love of Jesus revealed in the lives of his people. When someone speaks to me and tells me about their faith, they are a witness. When someone loves me and makes a sacrifice for me, they are a witness. When they remind me that God loves me no matter what, they are a witness. Through the witness of the people around me, my faith grows and I am then empowered to be a witness too.

All God's people are called to be his witnesses. We are reminded of this in the Baptismal covenant. We are asked, "Will you proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ?" In other words, will you be Christ's witnesses?

Often, we Episcopalians, don't like to think of ourselves as the "witnessing" type of Church. But unless we witness, unless we share what we know, the truth of the gospel will not be passed on. It's in our hands. It is the charge of our Lord.

This may seem daunting. Who are we to pass on the faith? But we are simply called to share what we know. We are called to share through our words and through our actions. We share through our words as we form relationships with others and then speak about our deepest thoughts and hopes. We can share the ways God has been present with us and the blessings we have received when we listen to his word. We also share our faith as we allow the love of God to be present in our actions. As we serve and care for others, the life of Jesus takes on flesh and bones. As we share in all these ways, we are Christ's witnesses in our world.

I know that over the past year, all of you have been witnesses to me of Christ's love. I want to thank all of you for the patience you have shown, especially with the frequent changes in liturgy caused by the changing

circumstances. This has been a long 14 months, but because of all of you pulling together and making the church present in our world, we are strong. Despite the struggles, despite not being able to worship in this building, despite concerns in your own families, you have continued to show God's love to our world. This is what it means to be a witness.