

**Sermon June 7, 2020**

**The Scripture passage this morning is called the Great Commission. Jesus' words are straight forward: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."**

**I wonder how you came to be Christian? Many of us were born into families that were members of the Christian faith. When asked about my church membership, I often reply that I was Christian before I was born, since many generations of family members professed belief in Christ. Jesus' words have encouraged Christians to share their faith with others for centuries. Believers have focused on making disciples on those who are unchurched. And yet, I understand making disciples as a never-ending process that includes teaching believers all that Jesus commanded.**

**One way that my discipleship has been strengthened is through the sharing of faith stories. We don't always talk much about our personal faith in the Presbyterian tradition. The religious word for sharing faith stories is testimony. Thomas Hoyt Jr. describes testimony this way:" We borrow from the world of courtrooms and trials when we talk about testimony. Testimony occurs in particular settings- a courtroom or a church- where a community expects to hear the truth spoken. Witnesses- those making the testimony- must speak the truth as they have seen, heard, and experienced it. The practice of testimony requires that there be witnesses to testify and others to receive and evaluate their testimony. It is a deeply shared practice... testimony is basic to human community. One classic praise testimony goes something like this: Thank you God, for waking me up this morning; for putting shoes on my feet, clothes on my back, food on my table. Thank you, God, for health and strength and the activity of my limbs. Thank you that I awoke this morning clothed in my right mind."**

**I have led many workshops with older adults over the years. I well remember teaching the same workshop four times in a weekend. The name of the workshop was "who do you want to be?" I thought this was a strange topic for older adults, but the workshops didn't lack participants. As one 84-year-old lady shared, "I am a different person than I was when I lived in my father's house as a girl. I am different than the woman who raised a family. And I have been a widow now for almost 30 years. I'm not quite sure who I am now what that has to do with my faith." We explored identity, asking where individuals felt their voices had been heard; sharing faith experiences that shaped their sense of self; and thinking about ways the church had supported and challenged individuals' identities as people of faith.**

**I shared an example of a testimony with them. Isabel Rogers, professor of Christian Ethics and moderator of the GA, shared with me her perception of how she gained a voice. These were her words: I remember overhearing (a conversation between my mother and a woman from her church.) I was home from college teaching one spring holiday. My sister was home with her 2 small boys. My mother was talking in the living room. I remember**

(the woman) saying how wonderful it was to see my sister, her husband and the two little boys filling up a whole pew in the church. ‘How great to see that she is serving the church,’ she said. ‘Isn’t it too bad about Isabel?’

I didn’t understand what Rogers was intimating. “What did she mean?” I asked. Her answer: “It meant I wasn’t married and therefore not serving the church. That’s the kind of thing I heard. Why didn’t that devastate me? It was painful. My mother didn’t contradict her. I knew my mother believed in me, but she never argued with people. I remember thinking that already in my work as a college professor, two people had gone out to the mission field from my Westminster Fellowship group. Was I not doing something for the church? I wasn’t married and having children in the pew. That was what I grew up in the midst of- that kind of experience.”

I wondered out loud, amazed that she had such a strong sense of herself in spite of these stereotypic expectations. “How did you manage to find your voice in the midst of that?” Her face mirrored her puzzlement: “That’s what I don’t know. I’ve asked my contemporaries- How did we, growing up in the deep South, get to be, by the time all of us got to college, against segregation? How did that voice come through? We learned it in church, but the church didn’t know it. The educational work of the church brought out our voices. I have a voice because of the church.

The people in my workshops talked of the places their opinions were valued- some spoke of family, others of their workplace, some mentioned people in the church who had attentively listened to them. Some told of the same experience in different words. It sounded a bit like this: “remember when Mrs. Green asked me to teach Sunday School? I didn’t know anything about it, but was pretty sure I couldn’t do it. I told her I would think about it. Later I thought, well Mrs. Green wouldn’t have asked me to do it, if she didn’t think I could do a good job. I decided to do it- and I learned things I never knew.” Other people’s confidence in a church member’s ability supported them to grow in faith and service. Perhaps you have had similar experiences.

Thomas Hoyt also writes of “testimony beyond words.” The philosopher Paul Ricoeur applies the term to “words, works, actions, and to lives which attest to an interaction, an inspiration, an idea at the heart of experience and history.” We all know that a quiet act of compassion can sometimes testify more powerfully to God’s presence than a well-spoken sermon. Each day in our community, people reach out to others in trust and care. These people bear witness to God’s presence in the world. One dimension is testimony to the church and the world, where witnesses tell others about the action of God in their lives. This has direct implications for our church. We need to share our experiences of faith with each other and with people outside our church community. We need to support each other as we speak the truth about what we have seen and heard!

Affirmation of Faith

**For Children:** During the month of June, Lambie will introduce you to Jesus’ friends.

### **Luke 8:1-3 (Easy to Read Version)**

*The next day, Jesus traveled through some cities and small towns. Jesus told the people a message from God, the Good News about God's kingdom. The twelve apostles were with him. <sup>2</sup> There were also some women with him. Jesus had healed these women of sicknesses and evil spirits. One of them was Mary, who was called Magdalene. Seven demons had come out of her. <sup>3</sup> Also with these women were Joanna, the wife of Chuza (the manager of Herod's property), Susanna, and many other women. These women used their own money to help Jesus and his apostles.*

***Good morning everyone. Your pastor asked me to talk with you about Jesus' friends. I know everyone here has at least one friend. Some people in this church have been friends for over 40 years. There are all kinds of friends in my flock: often sheep of the same age hang out together- we play together, learn together and just enjoy each other's company. Jesus wasn't any different than us in that way- he had friends too and we can read and hear about them in the Bible.***

***Lambie: I asked one of my friends to visit us today. Her name is Joanna and she is a bunny. She is a new friend- I don't know her very well, but I think that if we spend some time together talking, we will get to know each other better. That's why I invited her to church. Also, her name reminded me of one of Jesus' friends in the Bible.***

***Joanna: I know who you're talking about. It's the tradition in my family to name a girl bunny Joanna from each family. The story has been told that there was a young girl bunny named Joanna in the stable when Jesus was born.***

***Lambie: That's an interesting thought- just think your family has remembered that for centuries!!!! I guess mothers and grandmothers tell their children and then when they grow up they tell their children and the story stays alive.***

***Joanna: That's just what happens!!! Someday when I have children, I will name my daughter Joanna and I will tell everyone why.***

***Lambie: The stories in the Bible are just like that. Long before they were ever written down- people told them to each other and to their children. There is a story about a woman named Joanna who was a close friend of Jesus. Luke wrote down that she was the wife of one of Herod's stewards (Herod was the king of Judea, a very important man.) Luke says that there were a group of women who followed Jesus. They provided food and clothing for Jesus and his disciples.***

***Joanna: My mama tells that Joanna loved to listen to Jesus teach. She told all her friends the things that Jesus did and said.***

***Lambie: Luke also writes that Joanna followed Jesus as he carried the cross, watched him be crucified and die. Joanna went to the cemetery with Mary Magdelan and some of their other women friends. They were going to wash Jesus' body and wrap him in clean cloth. When they got there, Jesus' body was gone. The story says that 2 men in dazzling clothes appeared and told them that Jesus was risen. They ran and told the men who followed Jesus, and they didn't believe them. Peter and John did believe them and they ran to the tomb to see for themselves.***

***Joanna: Jesus had so many different kinds of friends: Peter and John were fishermen, while Joanna was a wealthy woman. I like knowing different kinds of people. It makes life interesting.***