

January 8, 2017

TEXT: Acts 10:34–43

TITLE: Testify!

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

In the passage from Acts we heard earlier, the most powerful words are in the first verse—but in many ways, they're not the most important words. The passage starts this way: *Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality (10:34). God shows no partiality. That's a powerful phrase and one worthy of being shouted from the mountaintop or preached from the pulpit. God can't be bought or bribed or blinded so as to unjustly favor one group over another. There's no "God's team" with everyone else being visiting opponents. In God's eyes, there is no "us—they," especially if the distinction is made around denominations, gender, race, sexual identity, economic status, or citizenship papers. So one can imagine Peter silencing the crowd around him, and then raising his voice boldly to announce *God shows no partiality. In every nation, anyone who worships God and does what is right is acceptable to the Lord.**

But in those opening words, I'm not sure Peter was trying to be a bold preacher. I think he was offering words of confession. Think about a time when you had to confess something—when you had to admit to someone you were wrong, that you'd messed up. In such moments, words can get stuck in your throat as you get up the courage to finally speak them out loud. It's not a time for bravado; it's a time for bearing your soul and being vulnerable before others. The old Scottish proverb says "Confession is good for the soul," which is true; however, confession rarely happens in a loud or boisterous way.

Acts 10 contains stories about two men—Peter and Cornelius: Peter, a faithful Jew raised to honor the laws of Moses and separate himself from the Greek, Samaritan and Roman people around him—and Cornelius, a centurion, an officer in the Roman army, stationed as part of the foreign military force in that region, yet a man described as devout, kind and generous. Both men received instructions from God that brought the two of them together, but they didn't know why. Yet the answer was right before their eyes. As soon as the two of them gathered in the same house, shared a meal and fellowshiped together—in that moment, their old worldviews were fundamentally challenged. Jew and Gentile brought together by the One God. In that moment, Peter's first words reflected his new awareness: *I have to come to understand that God shows no partiality.* He confessed out loud as he was processing and only dimly perceiving in his mind what it all meant. Peter then moved from powerful words to important words. He moved from preaching to testifying.

If you watch a lot of TV legal dramas, testifying might remind you of a courtroom—placing your hand on a bible and swearing to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God. But if you grew up in the Baptist

or African American church tradition, testifying is when you give a public testimony about the ways God's been good in your life. It can be as simple as a shouted "Amen" when the preacher says "Can I get a witness?" or as involved as telling how God provided a way out of 'no way' or brought healing and hope when you thought all hope was gone.

Let's be honest: Presbyterians aren't real big on testifying, but then we aren't so great at swaying to anthems or clapping on the off-beats, and yet God still loves us. We might not have a liturgical tradition of someone standing up, taking the mic and sharing a testimony during worship, but there are other times it happens. Gather us together for a time of intercessory prayer, and there will be testimony. Bring up an important topic in an Adult Education class or a committee meeting or a time of fellowship, and people will name how God has been active in their lives as a help and a healer. It may take a bit of nerve to share these stories, so the place of sharing will need to be trustworthy. And the testimony isn't designed to speak a huge, universal truth; rather it is simply one person saying at one particular time how God was especially real and present in her life. Yet the power of testimony is that it offers a challenge to all the other non-religious narratives around us. It brings God into the conversation—it brings justice into the conversation—it brings hope and faith and a belief in a saving God into an experience of life right here and now.

Testimonies are important words. When August Wilson was first approached about having his play "Fences" adapted into a movie, it was back in 1987. As things started to move forward, though, Wilson added a testimony of justice to the movie process when he requested that the film have an African American director. He said, "Until the industry is ready to hire a black to direct De Niro or Redford, blacks should at least be able to direct their own experience." It took almost 20 years before Denzel Washington could finally honor August Wilson's important testimony for justice. Another example: Franklin Delano Roosevelt was relaxing in his study with some of his advisors, and his wife Eleanor was with them, when he asked the group to name four outstanding leaders. FDR listed off Ben Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Teddy Roosevelt, and the earl of Orrery, one of Oliver Cromwell's key advisers. Eleanor then spoke up and offered her choices: Anne Hutchinson, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Emily Dickinson, and the suffragist Carrie Chapman Catt. Hers was an important testimony for equality.

Now you may push back and say that neither August Wilson nor Eleanor Roosevelt mentioned God in their testimonies, which is true. But what Wilson and Roosevelt did was to break their silence with a testimony that challenged the dominant worldview. Wilson named racism, and Roosevelt named sexism, changing the tone of the conversation around them. Good testimonies always do that. They are not about self-promotion or outdoing one another through stories about how God has worked wonders in your life. Testimonies are when the narrative of this world is forced to contend with the narrative of faith. Testimonies

happen when our words and our witness bring the God of justice, equality, healing and hope into the messiness of everyday life.

Why does this matter? Because the world does not know it is the world without the church being an alternative to the world, changing the conversation, adding testimonies about God into discussions about how to live our earthly life.

When Peter gave his confessional testimony there in the home of the Gentile centurion Cornelius, he began with saying “*God shows no partiality. All who worship God and do what is right are acceptable to the Lord.*” He then went on to tell the story of Jesus as he knew it—as he had lived it and experienced it and witnessed it. He began with the baptism of Jesus by John, that anointing of Jesus with power and the Holy Spirit. He then told about Jesus’ earthly ministry—doing good and healing the oppressed—before getting to Jesus’ unjust death on a cross and Christ’s resurrection by God on the third day. That resurrection was a boundary-breaking event. It brought together Peter and Cornelius, Jew and Gentile, ancient and modern people alike, who share table fellowship to this day just as the risen Christ did with his disciples long ago. Peter then told everyone to testify—to tell how God is Lord of all our days, of all people and all our situations; the One for whom we are willing to break our silence and offer a counter-narrative to the world’s dominant voice.

Remember: Our testimonies are not simply preaching to the choir (nothing personal, choir). It is not simply proclaiming a message that everyone around you already believes. It’s not saying “God shows no partiality” within the context of a congregation that already values inclusion and diversity. It is recognizing where we have been wrong. It is recognizing where we have held onto old beliefs when Christ wants to show us something new—when Christ would lead us into a new place in our life altogether. Peter made his testimony while standing in Cornelius’ living room—a place a few years earlier he could never in his wildest dreams imagined being in. We offer our testimonies as part of how Christ is active in our life now—perhaps talking about marriage equality or white privilege or economic justice in ways unimaginable a few years ago. Perhaps mentioning to others about a moment of prayer or a spiritual retreat that changed the life you’d been leading up until that moment. Perhaps remembering a close call on a slippery road or a positive report from a doctor that reinforced how precious each and every day is in this world that the Lord has made and Christ has redeemed.

Your breaking the silence is part of God’s plan for changing the world. Your offering of a testimony—a humble confession beginning with “I have come to realize that God doesn’t play favorites”—is precisely what Christ calls us to do. Acknowledging to others that you come to church and then your invitation to have them join you as we struggle, learn, pray, and break bread together is the only way this world will learn that it is just the world and not God. Thankfully, the position of God and Savior has already been filled. Testify, good Presbyterians, testify. May all God’s people say, Amen.