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Nov

Witnesses

Always Give Thanks

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, YEAR A

First, we are chosen, then we are tested. Now, we witness.

REFERENCES

Joshua 3:7-17

Psalm 107:1-7, 33-37

1 Thessalonians 2:9-13

Matthew 23:1-12

COLORS

White

Preaching Notes

Focus Text: 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13

Finally. All Saints Day falls on a Sunday this year. What an opportunity to truly celebrate this observance, one that Wesley considered his favorite. It is a celebration that lifts up the community of faith, that connects with history, that helps with the ongoing grief and the pride we have in those who have gone before. We honor those who sustained the church in powerful ways and who are now no longer visible in our midst. Yet their presence is felt in the rituals, traditions, and environment they helped shape. When we worship in the space they occupied, we bear witness to their ongoing influence on our lives and the identity of the church.

We bear witness. That is a function of the church, of the community of faith: to bear witness. It is a part of our identity. So, it is both who we are and what we do. We are witnesses. As you know, there

are two aspects of being a witness. First is the willingness to see. It is easy to avert our eyes and not see the world as it is, not see the suffering of our neighbors, not see the glory of God at work around us in surprising places and through surprising people. We are called to bear witness, to look into the eyes of the hurting, the marginalized, the broken and neglected. We are called to see those who are different from us and, therefore, require more work to truly see. We are not to assume we know but to see and investigate, to listen and learn, so that we can understand what we are seeing. We open our eyes to the world in all its glory and heartache. To follow Christ, to accept the gospel, is to live bearing witness to the world as it is and to hold on to the vision of the world as it could be—to see where the kingdom breaks through.

Second, we bear witness by telling what we have seen. Today, perhaps, you'll tell the stories of those who have gone before, bearing witness to their lives and their influence on the community of faith. At other times, you might tell your own story to bring hope to someone struggling with decisions. You are bearing witness to the work of the gospel by sharing your life with others.

Paul asks the Thessalonians to remember the shared ministry they had while he was with them. He asks them to remember the intimacy, the familial relations, and caregiving. We can assume it was a happy memory for them and an inspiration for the work that is now theirs to do in their larger community. But then he makes an interesting shift in the final verse of our text for this week.

We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers.

(1 Thess. 2:13 NRSV)

How often, preacher, are you aware of this two-tiered approach to proclamation and witness? Or perhaps more importantly, how often do members of your congregation understand that when they speak, when they give witness to what is happening in their lives, they too give voice to the word of God in the lives of their hearers as well? This might be a time for the community to wrestle with what this means. Most folks would not presume to speak for God when they speak, even words of faith. Most likely, many preachers would also step back from that understanding as well. "I'm just preaching" is not an uncommon attitude of preachers, whether articulated or not.

Take another look at the verse, however. There are a couple of little words that we need to pay attention to. The first is "not." Paul writes, "You accepted it *not* as a human word..." That's a bold

claim, to be sure. One wonders where he has evidence for this faith in the community at Thessalonica. Perhaps he is returning to the sentiments he expressed in the first part of the letter, where he tells the church that it is an example to churches everywhere. They must have, Paul reasons, understand God at work in the words to be motivated and empowered to live as disciples in their community and beyond so that the gospel can be seen in their lives. That's how he is able to say that they heard God in those words and not Paul.

Or maybe we should say, "not just Paul." There is another important little word in this final verse of our text. That word is "also." The Greek word is "*kai*," which is usually translated as "and" when used as a conjunction. But here, the placement means that "also" is the best translation for the word. That's a lot of attention to such an insignificant word. However, by using the word *also*, Paul shows that he understands that God works through our words, not in place of them or in spite of them. "God's word is also at work in you," he writes, "along with my instructions and example, along with the mentoring within the community and the experience that comes from walking in the faith." God works alongside is an important understanding for all of us who would speak of faith. It doesn't remove the responsibility we have for our words to be truthful and congruent with the gospel, but it adds a deeper dimension to our witness.

This is what it means when we say God is using my witness or God is using me to proclaim grace or reconciliation. We don't lose our agency in such an exchange. Our words and our witness still matter. But God speaks deeper in the exchange to bring a meeting of heart and mind and will and the possibility of transformation. Thus, we are chosen and tested and are witnesses in partnership with the whole church and the abiding presence of God, who confirms our words and receives our offering of praise and service. For that, we can always give thanks.

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