

Expert Witness

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 7th Sunday of Easter, May 15, 1994. Scripture Lessons: Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; Psalm 1; 1 John 5:9-13; John 17:6-19.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

I'm a big fan of Colombo. Colombo is a detective played by the actor, Peter Falk. I don't watch television that much but when I see there's a Colombo movie on I try to arrange my schedule so I can watch. Colombo appears to be an affable bumbling idiot at times but he's very wily. He has an eye for details and finds incriminating evidence in seemingly meaningless facts. Sometimes, in order to find the murderer, Colombo goes to an expert - a forensic expert or a car racing expert or a an expert in music and the arts - whatever kind of expert he needs. The expert examines the little bit of evidence at hand and testifies in court as to her or his findings. An expert witness often carries a lot of weight with a jury. An expert witness has credibility and makes everything sound so reasonable. An expert witness can't command belief - can't force the jury to believe his or her testimony. The expert witness can only bear witness with the hope that the jury will believe and make the right judgment.

John, in our epistle lesson, tells us that God is an expert witness. Jesus Christ is on trial. We're the jury. The witnesses are called to come before the jury and present their testimony. Many witnesses testify against Jesus. In John's day, some witnesses were testifying that Jesus wasn't a real man. He was a phantom like figure. He didn't really die on the cross. Jesus wasn't really God in the flesh. God, these witnesses said, can't become a human being. God is up there in heaven, far away, distant. God doesn't get messed up in the sordid details of

history. We have similar kinds of people who bear witness, in different ways, against Jesus today.

But, John tells us, God also bears witness - expert witness - concerning his Son. John is probably referring to three events in the life of Jesus - three events ^{where} ~~that~~ John himself heard God bear witness to Jesus. When Jesus was baptized in the River Jordan by John the Baptist, the Holy Spirit came upon him and God spoke from heaven, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." Several years later, Peter, James and John climbed the mountain of Transfiguration with Jesus. They saw Jesus transfigured before their eyes and they heard God bear witness concerning his son: "This is my Son, the beloved Son; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" But, above all, God bore witness to Jesus by raising him from the dead. When the women came to the tomb on the first Easter morning they didn't find the body of Jesus. God testified to them through the angel that Jesus was risen from the dead. Later the apostle Paul would write that Jesus was "declared to be the Son of God by the resurrection of the dead".

God continues to bear witness to us today concerning his Son. The witness he bears concerning his Son is this: God gave us eternal life. Past tense. Already accomplished. He did this when he came to us in the person of Jesus Christ, his Son, who is the way and the truth and the life. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God has given us eternal life. Whoever is in heaven is there only because of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. Whoever enjoys life - this life - through the enjoyment of all our senses - enjoys life through the grace of

our Lord Jesus Christ. In him was life and the life is the light of all people.

The One who gave us life - this earthly, earthy life - this flesh and blood life which we enjoy so much in good health, and long for in poor health - the one who gave us this life is not a distant Supreme Being, but Jesus of Nazareth, God in the flesh. And the One who gives us a longing for a better life - for a life that ^{... or with money, status, power} can't be fully satisfied in this earthly, earthy life - is Jesus Christ, the Lord of life. And the One who has already given us eternal life - objectively - whether we feel it or experience it now - is Jesus Christ. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. We don't look for eternal life in any place ^{else} or any one else than in Jesus Christ.

God bears witness to this. But God's witness isn't an overpowering witness. God doesn't speak ^{directly} to us today from heaven bearing witness to his Son. ^{God is only one of many who bear witness & many dispute his witness} God speaks ~~to us through the lips of sinful and fallible men and women. Paul wrote, in one of his letters, that God makes his appeal through us - through the foolishness of preaching. God bears witness to you this morning through me, through the choir, through the hymns, and above all, through Holy Scripture.~~ ^{all which point to Christ,} God doesn't overpower us with his witness. I suppose that God could rearrange the stars so that they would spell out, "I have given you eternal life, and this life is in Christ." But if God were to do this, my guess is that many of us would simply find some natural explanation for this strange phenomenon. But God doesn't overpower us with his witness. He bears witness through men and women like you and me. God does not prove infallibly that life is found only in Jesus Christ. He doesn't prove it. God

does not force us or manipulate us. He bears witness.

There's a kind of witness who takes us by throat and forces us to hear and listen. Some of us may have come in contact with well meaning people who witness to Jesus - they button-hole us - they strong arm us. We look for ways to avoid them. They try to force their witness on us. I experienced something like this when we were in the Old City of Jerusalem. ^{The person wasn't witness to a teaching of Jesus, He was trying to get me to buy a chess set.} Kay and I walked into a store. ^{in the old city} I saw a chess set in the back of the store, at some distance from the entrance, and hidden from it. I was mildly interested in this chess set. I asked the owner how much it cost. About \$200 dollars. I put it down and walked away. The owner placed himself between me and the entrance and proceeded to exert extreme pressure on me to buy the chess set. He testified as to its value, its craftsmanship, and it's antiquity. I offered him \$5 for it. "You humiliate me," he said angrily... so angrily that he frightened me. "Do you take me for a fool? Are you calling me a liar?" ^{He grabbed my arm.} He frightened me. I tried to leave. He interposed his body between me and the door. I didn't really want it but finally agreed to buy it for \$11.00 against the backdrop of fears and threats.

That's not how God bears witness. God does not force us into a corner, threaten us, and intimidate us when he testifies concerning his Son. God comes to us in weakness. God comes to us in Jesus Christ, in weakness and humility, not to overpower us with his witness but to subdue our wills by his love. God bears witness to us through human words and sinful, fallible, human beings which may be and often are misinterpreted. ^{Paul wrote, in one of his letters, that God makes his appeal through us - through the foolishness of preaching. God bears witness to you this morning through me, through the choir, through hymns, and above all, through Holy Scripture - all which point to Christ.}

assured that you have eternal life through Jesus Christ. I don't want you doubt this. I want you to have fully assurance. I want you to know this so that you will believe and trust and worship and serve and live for Jesus Christ my Son.