

**May 17, 2020 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter**  
**Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope, Minneapolis**

**Acts 17:22-31, Psalm 66:8-20**  
**John 14:15-21**

**Grace and peace, beloved witnesses of Christ Jesus. Amen.**

**Some of our Sunday School families** and teachers do a check in by Zoom each Sunday afternoon.

My family joins in when it works out, on sunny days often from the side of the sandbox or the front lawn.

Nick Tangen leads us, and this inter-generational group shares highs and lows from the week.

We hear a Bible story.

And then we talk about a question.

A week or two ago, Nick asked the kids and grown-ups something about doing church at home, and what we are missing about being at church together.

**I'm curious how you might answer questions like these:**

**What do you value about being part of a community of Christ?**

**How are you experiencing faith practices at home?**

**What are you missing about being together at church?**

Feel free to add your thoughts on the Zoom chat or in the You Tube comments.

I know this works better on some devices than others, so it's fine to listen.

We'll take just a minutes, then I'll read a few out loud.

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**I know in reading your responses here and from our conversations:**

we place a high value placed on being community, faithful community.

So, when we can't physically be together as community,

**What is it that still links us?**

**What keeps us together?**

Again, add a few words to the chat or comment section...

And I'll read them

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**We can say it in different ways** but the power in this community is God, it's Jesus, it's the Holy Spirit.

It's the reality that together we can live differently, with a new set of practices:

radical practices like forgiveness and healing,

hospitality, rest, grace, abundance,

a movement from sin and death... to life,.

**Today I want to focus on testimony, or witness.**

Brace yourselves, but by commenting in the chat, you've been witnessing to the Spirit's power and Jesus way.

In the reading from Acts that Seneca shared, Paul is witnessing to the people in Athens.

He's telling the story of Jesus not to the Jewish community, but rather a Gentile community.

Paul starts off by reflecting on *their* ways of being religious,

their altars to unknown gods that he's seen as he's walked around the city  
and then he shares *his* way, his beliefs, his apology.

Paul meets them where they are, with their language.

Then he says essentially, let me tell you an experience that I've had.

There's something beautiful and natural, about this witness.

**You've already shared so much.**

**Let me today simply offer three reflections on witness, on testimony.**

**First, witness, testimony, changes us.**

Back in Lent, during March, as the pandemic was beginning in the US,  
our Wednesday Lenten services included times of witness.

A number of you offered testimony:

you told stories of brokenness and beauty, powerful, vulnerable, moving stories.

Stories of prayer, stories of hope, stories of sobriety, stories of trust, stories of identity.

So honest, they were.

But here's the thing, we didn't just passively hear you.

We the community, present in that time, responded.

We reflected on your stories... and then offered our own witness.

That means that in the telling,

and in the hearing,

and then in the responding,

we all became witnesses, witnesses to what we had witnessed, we were changed.

**It's always hard to know how much we** or anyone allows themselves to be changed in the witness.

There is a give and take that happens in the Paul's words in Acts today.

Paul notices their religious practices, and he quotes that lovely line from the Greek poet Aratus:

“In God we live and move and have our being.”

Testimony, witness, engages us, it changes us.

### **Secondly, witness is powerful.**

Sometimes we tell the stories of God in our lives—

Maybe it was summer camp or time abroad or campus ministry.

Maybe it's an AA group.

Maybe it's an illness or a death that touched you, moved you.

Maybe it's these surreal and profound weeks of physical isolation or grief or uncertainty or fear.

**Dear friends, quite simply: we underestimate the power of testimony, the potential of witness.**

We forget the great need in our world to hear the stories,

to be touched by experience,

to be face to face with the Spirit's grace.

Witness, testimony is powerful because it's a space where God moves in us, through us.

### **And finally, witness can be communal.**

Sometimes we ask the question: Where did you see God?

That's a great question and there is plenty of witness in the response

But on the days when we don't feel we've got an adequate answer,

in the times (and there are plenty, especially right now) when we're not sure what God is up to,

then our best witness may be articulating where we don't see God,

but where God most surely is showing up.

By witnessing even in the hard times, we make a space where another person or the community can gently help us notice God's grace, God's way.

“I heard your witness and it sounds like God is doing this,” or “God is present there.”

Now, it's important to be careful, not to take over someone's story.

Our best response to witness is usually simply gratitude: Thank you.

But there are times when it takes community together discerning God's action, the Spirit's power.

These weeks, with so much before us, I often can't tell the witness I'm experiencing until the tears are welling up.

Then I know the Spirit is moving and that God is connecting in and through me.

We need community in this way.

**Yesterday's letters to the editor** in the Star Tribune included a number from people of faith.

One of them came from my spouse, Jane McBride, the pastor over at First Congregational United Church of Christ, our neighbors.

In all the tensions about when and how to "reopen" she commented that their congregation wasn't so worried about reopening, but rather was heartbroken by the pain and the struggle of neighbors: renters and families and undocumented households, those facing hunger or economic stress, the inequities based on race.

She was pressing the Senate and to center these needs.

She wrote, and I could share similar for our congregation: "The church is more alive and more open than ever—worshipping, caring for each other and serving our community"

**I'm seeing your witness in our conversation about solar power.**

Should we place solar panels on our building?

You are witnesses for the sake of the earth and our children.

And witnesses to the complex and creative ways to make this happen.

Witness can be communal

**In these stressful days when the world is in flux,**

we can curl into ourselves,

or we can trust the promise of Jesus: I will not leave you orphaned..

With the Holy Spirit, we can be witnesses of grace.

**Dearly beloved ones, may the Spirit walk with you.**

May witness be our way.

May love be real.

Amen.