
Can I Get A Witness?

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
Homecoming Sunday – Proper 15, Year C

*Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,
...let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us,
looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith,*
- Hebrews 12:1-2

We are back! Welcome to Homecoming Sunday, when we join the people that The Letter to the Hebrews just spoke about: the biblical heroes Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, and Samuel – the great cloud of witnesses that surrounds us each time we act in faith.

Can I get a witness this morning? Can I get a witness? I can't sing it like Marvin Gaye, or Mick Jagger, but that is my question for the day. Can I Get a Witness?

It's actually a familiar call from the pulpit in African-American churches. Can I get a witness? I love that question.

The Christian life is about witness, on all sorts of levels. Yes, we witness to Jesus in the church, and we witness to faith. But we witness to sad things, too: death and pain and wrong. Then, we witness to resurrection— not just the resurrection of Jesus, but the many resurrections we experience in our own lives. Finally, we witness to love. Is there love in the world? Yes, there is; and we are supposed to be witnessing to it.

As some of you know, my family visits a lake in Canada every year. It is where I met my wife, and where we return each summer. A few weeks ago, up there, I learned something else about witness.

The lake is actually a very public place. My son pointed out to me one day that the lake is different from a beach, where others go each summer. On a beach, all the people sit together, sometimes on a quite crowded beach; but we look away, out into a vast, often empty, ocean. It is seemingly endless, and beautiful. We certainly touch transcendence at ocean beaches.

But on a lake, when we sit on a dock or on a porch, and when we gaze out into the water, there is usually another shore, with people on the other side, gazing back out at us. We are all on the outside looking in, and it's a very public place. We are witnessing each other, sitting, swimming, boating, canoeing, sailing. We all see pretty much everything together. The lake is a public place.

A few weeks ago, I received a special gift. I was the humble recipient of an old sailboat, a beautiful old Canadian sailing dinghy, about fourteen feet long, made of cedar. She is a classic, and I spent as much time as possible this past month sailing her, in all sorts of weather conditions.

One day I took her out when the weather was way too windy, way too strong. I knew the weather was tempestuous, but it wasn't until I sailed into the main channel of the lake that I realized how gusty, and even dangerous it was. It was fun, but it

was also quite scary. I almost tipped over a couple of times, not a good thing.

When I sailed by the dock of a friend of mine, he was signaling me by crossing his arms over his head, essentially saying, "Get off the lake! Stop the sail! Go home!" He was right, of course, but I had quite a distance before I could get back to my own dock.

I continued to tack and lean and heel into the wind. But I was somehow comforted by having seen my friend on the dock. I was comforted, because I realized that he was watching me. He was actually watching over me. He was witnessing me. I knew that if I were to capsize, to turn over, he would be in his outboard motor boat in a flash to fish me out of the water.

That was a comforting witness. I was glad to have a witness, even as I was flailing about with a sail in the wind.

The Christian life is that kind of witness. For instance, we are about to witness baptisms today. Most of us have seen baptisms before. We know the familiar words of prayer over the water and the people. Still, there is something new, for we have not seen *these* beautiful people being baptized today. We are witnessing something new.

And we are engaging a very public community of faith. We are welcoming children into a Christianity that is a very public experience. Children learn Christianity, children learn of God and of Jesus and the Holy, not just by themselves, and not even in their own families. They learn of spirituality and holiness from larger communities, from communities that are public. We are all at a beautiful lake, looking at each other, witnessing each other.

Yes, we are witnesses today, witnesses not just to the holiness of God, but to each other. We are the supporters and observers and comforters and witnesses of each other, and for each other.

Sometimes we are going to be sailing in wind that is too strong for us. We will need watchers and helpers. Sometimes we will turn over our boats, even when the wind does not seem that strong at all. We will need people to come out on the water to us. Sometimes we will be sailing lonely on a day that has no wind at all, and we will need to be rescued. Sometimes a race will be set before us, and we will be racing together. Sometimes we will come in last place, and everyone will see us come in last.

Hey! That's what happened to me when I was sailing in a friend's boat, this past summer! We came in so far last that most everyone had left the dock. There were only two people left there, to blow the finish horn! Can I get a witness?

We, all of us, need witnesses in this life. People who have the courage to notice and the courage to see. People who see us when things are going right, and when things are going wrong. And they love and support us either way.

Sometimes we will witness things are not pleasant. Yes, there is pain in the world, there is wrong in the world. We witness that pain and wrong. But we also witness to grace and goodness amidst that pain. We need that witness of strength and salvation, too. We need the witness of resurrection and new life.

In a few minutes, the priest will ask parents and godparents of those being baptized this question: "Will you by your prayers and *witness* help this child to grow into the full stature of Christ?" That's what you are signing up for when you bring children to be baptized. You are signing on to being a witness for faith, a witness for love.

Then, a minute later, the priest will ask all of us, the entire congregation, who is here today: "Will you who *witness* these vows do all in your power to support these persons in their life in Christ?" Essentially, the priest will be asking us, "Can I get a witness?" And we will answer, "*We will! We will witness!*"

That's what all of us are signing up for today. The Letter to the Hebrews says that "Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, ... let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. (Hebrews 12:1-2)."

Can we get a witness? Yes, we are all witnesses, witnesses to Jesus Christ, and witnesses to each other.

AMEN.

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Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

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