

## Practicing Testimony

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Joshua 24: 1-3a, 14-25

Psalm 78 VU page 792 Part – 1

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Will you join me in a moment of prayer?

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer, amen.

What feelings does the word testimony bring up for you?

Good ones?

Bad ones?

Images of going door to door?

Images of a kind of in your face kind of religion?

Legal matters?

You will notice that testimony, testify and test all have the same root word.

Thomas Hoyt, Jr. says, "Testimony occurs in particular settings — a courtroom or a church — where a community expects to hear the truth spoken."

And goes on to say, "In testimony, people speak truthfully about what they have experienced and seen, offering it to the community for the edification of all. The practice of testimony requires that there be witnesses to testify and others to receive and evaluate their testimony. It is a deeply shared practice - one that is possible only in a community that recognizes that falsehood is strong, but that yearns nonetheless to know what is true and good."

Does testimony has some real negative connotations for most of us UCC folks?

But if you think about it as sharing your faith story, how does that feel?

Better?

We all have a faith story, whether or not we feel equipped to share it with others.

We all have stories of what God has done in our lives... we all have stories of witnessing God's love in the world.

And there comes a time when those stories cannot remain our own... when they need to be shared.

Our readings this morning are about speaking up and stating, testifying in public about God's action.

Joshua, who had taken over from Moses as leader of the Hebrew people, and he gathered all the people together and made a very public statement, "Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.

Powerful words... a legacy that lives on.

Words that are echoed in the psalm:

What we have heard and known, what our parents have told us,  
we will not hide from their grandchildren,

but declare to the next generation the testimony that you gave to Jacob and the law you  
appointed in Israel,

which you commanded them to teach their children, that the next generation might know them,  
children yet unborn, and these in turn should arise, and tell their children,

that they should put their trust in you, and not forget your great deeds, but keep all your  
commandments.

That's what testimony is... sharing our faith, so that others might know God's redeeming action  
in the world, and so that generations to come will know that they can put their trust in God.

So often we feel as if our faith is a private matter, not to be spoken of in public... in fact, when I  
started the Discernment process on my way to ordination, one of the hardest things I had to do  
was speak about my faith, first to my discernment committee, and then to various other  
committees and groups as they interviewed me and determined my fitness for ministry.

And each time I did, each time I spoke of where and how God was active in my life, it got  
easier...

I am your minister, but the practice of testimony cannot be left in my hands... if it is, it is  
confined to this gathered community and those whom I encounter throughout the week...

You each have a circle of friends and family, some of which overlap, but imagine if each one of  
you shared your faith story with that circle.

Not in a way that forces it down someone's throat, but in an inviting way... simply sharing your  
experiences of God.

Believe me, when you start having those conversations, your relationships will become closer  
and more intimate.

Joshua proclaimed that he and his household would serve the Lord.

How is your household serving the Lord?

What makes it possible for people to share their faith... to serve the Lord.

Prayer, worship and action.

You will notice that as I am preaching this series on Practicing Our Faith, none of the practices are separate in themselves, there is overlap and intertwining.

And I think all of them have included those three things.

In those three things there is prayer as your personal or private time with God...

Worship as the time when we gather together as a community of faith...

And our actions are what we believe God is calling us to do in our world.

All of these strengthen our ability to share our faith with others... to tell others why we do some things... like get up early on a Saturday to make breakfast at Brunswick Street Mission...

To teach Sunday School...

To come to choir practice each week....

To visit strangers in hospitals...

To bring food for the Food Bank...

Sponsor a refugee family...

We don't do it simply to be 'good people.'

But rather, we do it because God and Jesus call us to do it...

In our words and in our actions, we are serving the Lord.

Tuesday is Remembrance Day.

A day set aside to remember all men, women and children who have died and who continue to die as a result of war.

Many of our soldiers who fought in the two world wars were Christian.

And went to war convinced that they were serving the Lord, practicing their faith... doing their part.

They lost their tomorrows... And we lost their tomorrows.

The world lost and continues to lose the potential of so many people.

Not just people living in this wonderfully safe country of ours... but people all over the world.

My father was in the Air Force, I grew up on air force bases in various parts of the country... my husband and all of my brothers-in-law were in the navy... and I now have a nephew in the army... one who has volunteered to go to Afghanistan.

I have the utmost respect and pride in our forces... but I wish they weren't necessary...

One of my classmates from theological school spent 6 months as chaplain in Afghanistan.

When I first met Harry, he had hair down to his shoulders... was the life of the party... and was the ultimate nonconformist.

But... one summer he was employed as the padre at Cadet Camp... he came back to school with hair up to here!

And a new found appreciation for the military and their role.

After graduation and ordination he was the minister in a congregation for a while, but apparently the call of the military beckoned.

I heard through the grapevine that he had become a military chaplain... and then that he had been sent to Afghanistan.

And then in our United Church Observer, there was an article written by him... this is part of what he says:

*"I never imagined when I got on the plane last February that I would have to do the 'long walk,' otherwise known as the ramp ceremony for soldiers who had died, so many times.*

*I didn't know how much our tour would test all of the Canadian soldiers, mentally, physically, spiritually.*

*Canadian soldiers are fascinating people. Their behaviour sometimes pushes the limits of conventional morality and yet they will travel to the bleakest places in the world to carry out the wishes of their government.*

*I have seen a soldier, whose language would make the most seasoned sailor blush, cry unabashedly in the arms of a friend, and then head back out to face bullets and bombs.*

*They are tough and strangely sensitive, good natured, yet often complaining, and they have no idea of just how brave they are.*

*God has blessed me by placing me among them and only asks that I give them a shoulder to cry on, a listening ear and from time to time, an inspired kick in the ass!"*

When I read that I laughed, because that was Harry.

He finishes the article by saying, *"Always, it was my role to somehow convey to the men and women of the Canadian Forces that they are important, that the work they do is vital to our world.*

*In short, it was my job to make known to them that they are beloved children of God. It was, and continues to be a wonderful and awesome privilege."*

To end I want to share a poem written by Ann Weems at the start of the conflict in Iraq:

On the edge of war, one foot already in,  
I no longer pray for peace:  
I pray for miracles.  
I pray that stone hearts will turn to tenderheartedness,  
and evil intentions will turn to mercifulness,  
and all the soldiers already deployed  
will be snatched out of harm's way,  
and the whole world will be astounded onto its knees.

I pray that all the "God talk" will take bones,  
and stand up and shed its cloak of faithlessness,  
and walk again in its powerful truth.

I pray that the whole world might sit down together and share  
its bread and its wine.

Some say there is no hope,  
but then I've always applauded the holy fools who never seem to give up on the scandalousness  
of our faith:

that we are loved by God.....  
that we can truly love one another.

I no longer pray for peace:

I pray for miracles.

Thanks be to God, amen.