

There are ways you want your church to be described and ways you don't. In the “ways you don't” category...well, imagine you belong to brand new congregation called North Point Community Church. You're so new that you still rent meeting space in a shopping mall. So one Sunday morning you drive into the parking lot, and what do you see on the big marquee? The name of your church. Only it's not the full name. It's an abbreviation. And not a very good one. It reads, “Welcome to No Point Church!”

Looking back, the folks at North Point still laugh about that. They can afford to. With some congregations, “No Point Church” might hit a little too close to home, but they have a clear sense of mission, and they're pursuing it. Their church definitely has a point – and it's the right one.

I don't think that's by chance, either. I don't think it ever is. To make sure your church has a point – the right point – you have to keep coming back to the same basic question: *What has Jesus called us to be?* And that's not hard to figure out. Jesus tells us clearly in our text: **“You are witnesses.”**

Now, I realize we may not be real thrilled about this being our point. The words “witness” and “witnessing” often bring unpleasant images to mind. Knocking on a stranger's door and asking if they're saved. Standing on a street corner passing out tracts. Waving a sign at a Mariner's game that says, “John 3:16.” So we may think: *Me...called to be a witness? Please, Lord, anything but that!*

Fortunately, that isn't the kind of witness Jesus has in mind. But we are still called to be witnesses. And this isn't just one responsibility among many; something way, way down at the bottom of the list. Witness is at the top of the list. In fact, it's the main point of the list. Jesus defines our mission very clearly: **“Go...make disciples of all nations, baptizing them...and teaching them...”** And how do we carry out this mission? He also defines that very clearly: **“You are witnesses.”** There is no wiggle room. Jesus doesn't say, “You ought to be witnesses...” Or “I'd like you to be witnesses...” Or “if you can fit it into your schedules and it doesn't sound too un-Lutheran please consider being witnesses...” No, He says, **“You are witnesses.”** That is what we are!

So this being the case, let's be clear what we're talking about here, for believe me, I share your discomfort with what often passes for “witness.” In fact, I remember an incident one Sunday afternoon years ago when I was still serving in Anaheim. We had taken the youth to Newport Beach. So there I was, soaking up the rays, when off in the distance I saw this group slowly making its way toward me. And what were they doing? They were going from person to person, asking if they were born again, and handing out tracts. My very first thought was: *Please, Lord, don't let them come over here!* And I was a Christian! A preacher for heaven's sake! In fact, a preacher who had just spoken that morning on the

need to be good witnesses! But that sure wasn't what I had in mind! Talk about awkward, intrusive, superficial! And if that approach turned me off, what are the chances a non-Christian would find it appealing? Slim to none! So first of all, let's be clear what kind of witness we're not talking about here. Not the kind that ambushes strangers with a canned message and a glossy tract. Not the kind that pressures people into making a decision for Christ. Not the kind that tries to convert people with our own persuasive powers and techniques. To the contrary! What we are talking about is a sensitive, respectful kind of witness that simply shares and shows what Jesus means to us and leaves the rest to the Holy Spirit.

That's the approach we find in the New Testament. Take the book of Acts, for example. We don't see the Apostles ambushing people with their message. Their approach is sensitive. They pick the right time, the right place, and the right way to share the good news. Also, their approach is respectful. Often their witness is simply an answer to a question someone has asked them. Most of all, they depend on the Holy Spirit for results. Not themselves. The Holy Spirit. And what happens when they don't take this approach? We see that, too. Acts 17 shows Paul's biggest flop: the speech on Mars Hill. And why is it a flop? Because he depends too much on his own clever techniques. So clearly, the New Testament models a sensitive, respectful, Spirit-led approach to witness, and that needs to be our approach, too. Simply share and show what Jesus means to us and leave the rest to the Holy Spirit.

Okay. Now that that's settled, let's get down to specifics. Jesus says, "**You are witnesses.**" How do we actually go about it?

First, of course, we can witness with our words. And let's not underestimate how important this is. We may not want to ambush people, knock on doors, or preach on street corners, but we mustn't go to the opposite extreme and just clam up. People need to hear the good news of Jesus. People need to know how to get free from guilt, how to find power to handle their challenges, and how to be sure of eternal life. So we need to witness with our words. And a good, moderate approach is the one outlined in 1 Peter 3:15, "**Always be ready to account for the hope that is in you with gentleness and respect.**"

Now, some of us may find even this approach intimidating. *Me? Actually say something? Yikes!* But it's quite doable. We're not talking about explaining advanced theology, just sharing what's in here [*heart*]: "**the hope that is in**" us. Even in Confirmation, students learn how to explain their basic beliefs to others. Before they're confirmed, we make sure they're able to do it. So an adult Christian should be able to do the same – and needs to be able to do the same. I mean, you never can know when you'll be the one called upon to defend Christian beliefs or explain them. You never can know when you'll be the one called upon to share God's promises with someone who's searching. In that moment, too much is at stake to just clam up. Perfection is not called for, but faithfulness is – faithfulness to what Jesus says we are: "**You are witnesses.**"

Case in point: Ask Melissa Reid sometime about her experience witnessing when she was a patient in the hospital. It certainly wasn't anything she set out to do – she was one sick puppy! – but what a good thing she was ready! You see, one day her nurse commented on the way she handled all the challenges she'd been dealing with. There had been after another, yet Melissa had coped so well. *How was she able to do that?* the nurse asked. *Where did she find the strength?* And Melissa thought: *Well, she asked!* So Melissa told her: how her faith in Christ helped her; how the Lord provided her with strength. Melissa just shared what was in here [heart]. And do you know what happened? That nurse became a Christian. What's more, that nurse went home, shared her new faith with her husband, and now he has become a Christian. How about that?! And mind you, this didn't happen because Melissa spoke so eloquently or used some handy-dandy witnessing technique. It happened because the Holy Spirit used Melissa – used her witness, used her words. And folks, who knows when we might face the same kind of opportunity? We need to be ready. **“Ready to account for the hope that is in” us.** Ready to witness with our words.

That said, though, did you notice what prompted the conversation between Melissa and the nurse? It was Melissa's attitude, her behavior. And this leads us to the second way of witnessing. We can witness with our actions.

We all know the saying, *“Actions speak louder than words.”* But the truth is, our actions can do a lot more than that. They can drown out our words completely or amplify them immeasurably; they can sabotage our witness or beautifully enhance it. For people do watch us, and whether or not it's fair, they do judge our religion by the way we practice it. So while our words are important, they will never be enough. We also need to witness with our actions.

A pastor in Texas tells how he learned this just buying some CD's. There was a sale on – two CD's for \$10.99 – so on his way to a meeting, he stopped by the store to buy some. Now, he was kind of in a hurry, so once he bought the CD's, he hustled out to the car, and only then did he realize that the clerk had charged him \$1.99 instead of \$10.99. His first thought was that he didn't have time to go back and take care of it. But his conscience told him, *“You don't have time not to go back.”* So, he went back, waited in line, then told the clerk, “I'm afraid you made a mistake when I bought the CD's. The sign says \$10.99 but you just charged me \$1.99.” She said, “Sir, I didn't make a mistake.” He replied, “Ma'am, there is the sign and here is the receipt. I still owe you \$9.00, so could I just pay back what I owe?” “No, sir,” she repeated, “I didn't make a mistake.” This just floored him, so she continued, “Sir, I didn't make a mistake, but maybe I should explain myself. For 17 years I've been away from church. Just considered church folks a bunch of hypocrites. Well, lately life has been pretty challenging, so last Sunday I decided to give church another try. Sir, it happened to be your church. Your sermon was on integrity. And when I saw you in line, I wondered if you just preached this on Sunday or if you actually lived it during the week. So I decided to find out. And you do live it! So...I'll see you in church next Sunday!”

Now, in this case it was a pastor who was put to the test, but the same sort of thing could happen to any of us, couldn't it? And truth be told, it probably does. People do watch how we live, how we treat others, how we handle adversity. People do ask whether our faith makes a difference. People do judge our religion by the way we practice it. Whether or not it's fair, that's a fact. And since it is a fact, why not make the most of it? Why not let this fact be an incentive to make sure we practice what we preach? Even more, why not use this fact as an opportunity to show what difference our faith makes? People may not be ready to hear our words. That's their prerogative. But that doesn't mean we can't share and show what Jesus means to us. We can still witness with our actions.

We can and we do. As individuals and as a church. For instance, take our support for Lutheran Community Services. A few weeks ago, I was at their annual fund-raiser brunch – a lot of us were – and a woman spoke to us about all the agency had done for her family. As she did, I noticed something. She didn't refer to Lutheran Community Services. She just kept saying "Lutheran." "Lutheran" did this for her. "Lutheran" did this for her family. "Lutheran" helped her get a grip on life. "Lutheran" made a difference! "Lutheran." And folks, that was us! That was you and me! A lot of times we focus on our individual witness, but there's also power in our corporate witness. Individually, our contributions may not seem like much, but together we make such a difference! I mean, just through this particular ministry – Lutheran Community Services – we touch one out of every 50 Americans. Did you know that? We have the largest non-profit social service agency in the country. And most of what we do is not for fellow Lutherans, not necessarily for fellow Christians. We're there for anyone who happens to need our help. That is some witness! And it's just one example of many! Around the community, around the nation, around the world, you and I together touch so many lives witnessing with our actions.

But then, what else would we expect? We're not a "no point" church, are we? We're not a "missed the point" church, either! We have a point. Jesus has given us a point. He says, "**You are witnesses.**" The challenge, though, is to stick to the point, and that is the challenge we take home with us today. Jesus' call is clear: "**You are witnesses!**" We must share and show what He means to us. Jesus' call is compelling: "**You are witnesses!**" We must to be ready for whatever opportunities come up – in fact, we must seek them out. We're called to witness with words when we can – sensitively, respectfully. We're called to witness with actions always, keeping faith active in love. We need not worry about results! The Spirit is in charge of results! And the Spirit can "**do abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine!**" But we do need to provide words and actions for the Spirit to work through. So that is the call! That is the challenge! That is the point, the point we want to stick to! Jesus tells us: "**You are witnesses.**" Amen.