

Call Your First Witness

A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.

7th Sunday of Easter: the Sunday after Ascension Day, Yr. A. [Mothers' Day] May 8, 2005

There was a children's Easter program at a big downtown church. A young fellow of about five or six was chosen to play the part of Jesus. He was so excited. He had a white robe to wear and just a few lines to say. He practiced them at home with his mother – over and over. When the time came for the program, mom was in the front pew, ready to prompt him in case he forgot anything. Well, the little guy hadn't appeared in front of a crowd before, and this was a very big church. He came out front and suddenly had stage fright. He went blank. There was a long awkward silence, during which his mother was silently mouthing his first line, to get him started: "I-am-the-light-of-the-world." She did it slowly several times. —He didn't get it.— Finally she resorted to a whisper, "*I am the light of the world.*" He got it. His face broke into a grin, and he said in a big voice, "My mom is the light of the world!"

Today is Mother's Day, but in the Church calendar it's a Sunday of anticipation—a day of waiting. Thursday was Ascension Day, the day when Jesus spoke the words we heard in the second lesson this morning from the Book of Acts. For forty days after the Resurrection, Jesus appeared again and again to his disciples. They saw him, touched him, ate with him, talked and walked with him. At the end of those forty days they were convinced beyond any shadow of a doubt that Jesus had, indeed, risen from the dead. Then came the day when he departed from them to return to God. But before he ascended, Jesus told his friends to stay where they were – in Jerusalem – until they were filled with the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus called "the Promise of the Father." He said, *You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*

The Holy Spirit is the "breath of God." The New Testament Greek word for *spirit* is the same as the word for *breath*. The "Breath of God" is what makes it possible for us to speak about Jesus... to be his witnesses. Without that "Breath," we'd be as scared as the little boy in the Easter program I told about, and we wouldn't be able to say a thing. To be a witness is to "give testimony" – out of our own experience. It's an act of communication. To be Jesus' witness doesn't mean telling other people about *what* we know – like a lot of catechism answers that we've memorized – but rather talking to them about *whom* we know: Jesus, our Master and our friend. It's easy and it makes us happy to tell somebody else about a person that we love – about our wife or husband, or our children, or (considering what day it is) about our mom.

From experience we understand that it's possible to know and love and have a deep, meaningful, intimate relationship with a person and not have all the facts about that person's life history, or perhaps even to think we have some of the facts, but actually to have them wrong. The quality of the relationship doesn't depend on the amount of data we have about the other person. Instead, it depends on the depth of the spiritual bond between us. Take, for example, the relationship between a child and that child's mother. A little child doesn't necessarily know about mom's early life, or where she went to school, or what kind of work she used to do. A child might not know much about mom's personal history. But the child *knows* mom: "That's my mom! She loves me." The child knows how mom treats him, how she communicates approval and disapproval, how she teaches the right way to act. That's the way it is with us and Jesus. We don't need to be expert Bible students or theologians before we can talk about the Jesus who loves us and who has come in the power of his Spirit to live in our hearts forever.

I enjoy "lawyer novels" – like the ones by John Grisham and Scott Turow. I enjoy the tense court room scenes and the clever arguments from the underdog lawyer. In those scenes, when the rival attorneys' opening presentations to the jury are finished and the trial is really getting under way, one of the first things the judge says is "Call your first witness."

"*Call your first witness.*" Let's think about that in the context of our own lives. Who was the first person you can remember who talked to you about God? ...Who first told you about the love of Jesus? ..Who first gave you a personal, real-life example of how to be like Jesus?

I know who my first witness was. It was my mom. She taught me to pray before I went to sleep at night, and she sat on the bed and listened to what I was saying to God. (As I recall, she never stopped me from saying whatever was on my mind. But sometimes she suggested additions!) She read Bible stories to me and helped me learn to read the Bible for myself – creating a habit that has remained with me ever since. Sometimes mom would ask me, particularly if I had engaged in some clearly out-of-bounds behavior, “Do you think the Lord likes it when you do things like that?”

Mom wasn't perfect – she could nag and complain and had a gift for using guilt to manipulate me – but she wasn't bashful about telling me about the Lord she loved and knew. And she didn't hesitate to speak on his behalf, either, if she felt I wasn't listening closely enough to him for myself! Mom was my “first witness.” But her testimony was in more than words. Her actions spoke just as loudly as her words, maybe more so. I'll give you just one example.

When I was a kid, mom was a clerk in a single-window postal substation downtown. Now, back in the 50's, before suburban shopping malls were built, “downtown” was lively – even in small towns like the one I grew up in. All the banks, businesses, shops and most of the restaurants were there. A little developmentally disabled fellow named Jerry used to come into mom's post office a lot because he ran errands for a downtown store – like taking parcels to be mailed. Jerry wore funny clothes and didn't talk like an adult, even though he must have been middle aged. And he didn't bathe as often as he should. He would hang around for a long time and talk to mom after he'd mailed his packages. (Jerry was the kind of person that we called “retarded” back in those days.) Mom was patient with him and laughed with him, and sometimes she would take him down to Otto's drugstore on the corner and buy him an ice cream at the soda fountain. My dad used to tease her about her “boyfriend Jerry.” He'd say, “Did you take your smelly boyfriend to Otto's for ice cream this afternoon?”

I can remember Mom's simple answer: “Jerry's o.k. He needs a friend. Jesus wants us to care about people like him.” Mom was my first witness, and her testimony lingers in my heart. The “breath of God” gave her words and gave her energy to live out her faith.

Jesus said, *You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses.* There's a word I wish I could rescue from the oblivion to which most Episcopalians assign it: that's the word *evangelism*. To evangelize means “to tell the good news.” That's what we do when we communicate – in words or in actions – the truth that Jesus is alive and at work in the world. *Witnesses* are people who have a relationship with God and an experience with God that we can't keep quiet about, an experience that has re-shaped our lives. —But we can't be an evangelizing, Good News-telling, witnessing Church until we are collectively filled with the “Breath of God,” the Holy Spirit.

Jesus says that this filling with the Spirit is a *promise from God*. It's a promise, and God keeps his promises. What we need to do is believe that Jesus is raised from the dead, stay united, be patient, and pray. I believe that God wants our little Episcopal Church here in the heart of faith-resistant Aspen to be an effective witnessing body of Christians whose words and works demonstrate the amazing love of God. I believe God wants us to be a church where people who haven't known any of us before can come into our gatherings – for worship, or work, or even for play – and say, “God is truly here. We meet God among you.”

The Holy Spirit will come to the church that wants him.

The Holy Spirit will come to the church that is waiting for him.

The Holy Spirit will come to the church that is praying for him.

Let us be united in one heart and mind as we pray, *Come Holy Spirit, and fill us. We need you. Come, Holy Spirit, and renew us. We want you. Come, Holy Spirit, and take charge of our church and of our lives. We will obey you. Come, and do your work in us, inspire us, equip us, and make us witnesses for Jesus. We pray in his name. Amen.*