

Not a Spectator Event
Acts 1:6-14; Psalm 68:1-10; 32-35
5/4/08

Long ago, there used to be a popular show on television: a police show called *Dragnet*. It started as a radio broadcast. You can still catch it on reruns from time to time. The original *Dragnet* - not to be confused with Dan Aykroyd's two recent movie versions - starred a rather odd actor named Jack Webb, who played detective Sergeant Joe Friday.

It gave our culture a wealth of catch phrases - the most famous being "The story you have just seen is true; the names have been changed to protect the innocent." Jack Webb, in his role as Joe Friday, is singlehandedly responsible for the other *Dragnet* catch phrase everybody knows. When faced, as he often was, with a somewhat hysterical woman who'd witnessed some dreadful crime, Sergeant Friday would pull out his notepad, stare coolly back at her, and say in his trademark monotone voice, "Just the facts, ma'am."

Joe Friday's just the sort of person you'd want to have as a witness in court: on your side. He's cold and analytical. Joe Friday would be the ideal witness if the goal were simply to unearth the facts. But he'd be less than ideal for another sort of witnessing: the witnessing that leads others to faith.

This Morning's passage is about telling the facts, but it is not as cold and analytical as Joe Friday is asking! This passage is called the ascension passage when Jesus was taken into heaven. He had spent 40 days after the resurrection with his disciples (not just the 12). Now he gives them final instructions and is taken into heaven. We confess this in the Apostles Creed, "he ascended into heaven and sits on the right hand of God."

On this occasion the disciples ask Jesus if this was the time when he would restore the kingdom of Israel. There was a promise from generations ago that God would one day send a messiah to conquer Rome and re-establish the people of Israel. They want to know if this is that time. Jesus tells them they do not need to know the times God has set.

Basically Jesus tells them this is what you do not need to know and this is what you do need to know. In a few days you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. After saying this, Jesus is taken into heaven. The disciples go back to Jerusalem, after some angels coach them to stop staring into heaven. We are told that all those who were believers in the resurrection constantly devoted themselves to prayer.

As Jesus tells the first century disciples you will be my witnesses, he is telling the disciples of every generation the same thing. There are several responsibilities of the church - one of the most important is witnessing to Jesus Christ.

What does witnessing mean? What do you imagine (door to door or pushy)?

In those days a witness had a legal responsibility. If a person observed an event or had an experience, he or she was responsible to tell the truth in court. Webster defines witness as to see, hear, or know by personal presence and perception; to be present at an occasion as a formal witness, spectator or bystander. There were many people at our wedding a week ago Saturday. We were told by my dad "I charge you as you stand before these witnesses (friends and family) that love and loyalty will establish your home with peace and blessing". There were many witnesses. John Jastrow, my workout buddy, was the official witness who signed the marriage certificate. If there was any question about the wedding, John would be contacted.

A pastor of a church on the outskirts of Washington, D.C., was conducting a workshop for church members who had volunteered to serve as worship leaders. He was taking the group through the rudiments of public speaking: how to speak loudly, clearly and with expression.

After the session, an elder of his church came up and said he very much appreciated all the suggestions about how to speak in public, but he found it particularly challenging to break some old habits he'd fallen into. "The real challenge for me," he admitted, "is that I've had years and years of testifying before Congress. The point there is to be as boring as you can be, so they'll doze off and no one asks you any questions."

Our calling as witnesses to Jesus Christ is meant to be very different. We are not to bore people to death nor are we just telling the facts with no emotion or love. Being a witness is sharing our experience of God's love. We do this because we have been loved by Jesus and he has loved us with the intention of love through us. As Pam and I look for a house, one of our hopes and prayers is for God to put us in a neighborhood to love people. We want to be a witness. The most powerful way to be a witness is love.

Love is very patient and kind, never jealous or envious, never boastful or proud, never haughty or selfish or rude. Love does not demand its own way. It is not irritable or touchy. It does not hold grudges and will hardly even notice when others do it wrong. It is never glad about injustice, but rejoices whenever truth wins out. If you love someone you will be loyal to him no matter what the cost. You will always believe in him, always expect the best of him, and always stand your ground in defending him. In life, these three things remain: Faith, Hope and Love, but the greatest of these is Love.

Jesus promises to empower the disciples with power from the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the guide and resource for our sharing and talking about our faith experience. We connect with the Holy Spirit through prayer. As the followers of Jesus gather in Jerusalem, waiting for God to empower them, they are constantly praying.

- Talking to neighbors
- Getting to know - jobs, family, likes and dislikes
- Available to help
- Sharing tools...time

"I am ashamed to say that sometimes we see love -- and God is love -- more clearly in those who claim no faith than in those of us who do. I became particularly aware of this paradox when our Sunday school class curriculum directed us to reflect on where we had seen God.

At the time, I lived in a middle class neighborhood where most of us owned our homes, but there were a few renters whom we held in some disdain. Among them was one family who were not the sort of folks we were accustomed to having as neighbors. The man drove a noisy pickup truck that was perpetually primer gray and on which he worked nearly every weekend. Although the man was clean and kept his hair combed, he came outside wearing no shirt, and a cigarette constantly dangled from his lips or fingers. Some of my neighbors called them rednecks, a word some Southerners use to sum up a host of characteristics that we hope our families have left behind permanently. But, they were a loving family. The father often played outside with his kids, riding bikes, shooting baskets, just watching over them.

Also on our street was a group home for mentally challenged men. I saw the men frequently, and one of them, David, sometimes helped me bring in the groceries or accompanied me as I walked my dog. David was talkative and outgoing, telling me about his latest kite or toy as we walked. Another of the men, whom I'll call Kenny, older than David, was quite shy and seldom spoke. If David was present, Kenny let him do the talking. One weekend, the one before that Sunday school class when we talked about seeing God, I was out walking the dog when Kenny was outside. I stopped to engage him in conversation. He was loading baseball equipment in the car, and I was sure I could get him to talk about going to the park, which I knew he enjoyed. But he responded warily, only in monosyllables. Then, as he looked over my shoulder, I saw his eyes light up. I turned to see that my truck-driving neighbor was pulling into the drive. Kenny stepped past me and hurried over, a smile transforming his face. When our neighbor got out of the car, Kenny enveloped him in a warm hug, which was heartily returned. The man gave Kenny a high five, calling him by name and saying, "How's it going, man?" It was clear that this man -- disdained by his neighbors -- had built a warm and accepting relationship with the shy man who could not quite trust me.

Who had been embodying the love of God for Kenny? Neither I nor my uncomfortable neighbors could claim that distinction. In the embrace between Kenny and our neighbor, I saw Christ's love.

God will reach into the world. That is God's nature. Who will be available?"