

*From the Rev. Dr. Jeff Schooley's Desk:*  
*A Sermon for Sunday, February 19, 2023 - Transfiguration Sunday*

There's probably 50-ish years between the events on Mount Tabor, where Peter, James, and John witnessed the Transfiguration of Jesus into all His divine glory, and when Peter writes to the churches in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. (All places that are in modern-day Turkey, God bless them). 50 years. That's a long time. Last year, in November, video games celebrated their 50<sup>th</sup> birthday with the anniversary of the release of *Pong* by Atari. Compare *Pong* to the VR video games of today and you'll get a real sense of how long 50 years can be.

Yet even with 50 years having elapsed, still we find Peter returning to his experience on Mount Tabor when he got to see Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah, was then enveloped in light, and heard God speak the most definitive testimony that can be given about Jesus: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" 50 years of time and this is the moment that Peter returns to in order to instruct and encourage those aforementioned churches.

Some context is important here: Peter is, at the time of this letter, sitting in jail, in Rome, very old, and very near his martyrdom, which tradition reports occurred when he was crucified upside down. But he's still hearing reports from the churches, he's still aware of their challenges, and the thing causing him the most concern is a pattern of false teachers infiltrating the churches and spreading heresy – both heresy of doctrine and heresy of behavior. And so, the old man sharpens his quill, asks the Roman guards to leave him alone for a little while, and sets out to try to strengthen the churches against false teachers.

Of course, "false teacher" is already begging the question to a degree, right? Who or what makes a teacher false versus true? I'm not trying to stand up here and sound like Pontius Pilate, saying, "What is truth?" But if we're going to work in categories of "false teachers" and the implied "true teachers," it's not wrong to ask for some qualities or characteristics that mark those differences. I mean, I could stand up here and tell how the carburetor on your 1994 Isuzu pickup truck works, but you'd do better to listen to Jason back there. After all, I literally had to Google "how to spell carburetor" just to write this part of the sermon. I'm not off to a great start. Further exploration will reveal that the only callouses on my hands are on my fingertips from typing sentences like "how to spell carburetor," and thus my credibility on this topic is completely shot! Oh, and if "1994 Isuzu pickup truck" sounded suspiciously specific, that's because while Googling carburetors, I discovered that they haven't been a thing since 1994. I did not know that. I'm three decades behind on automobile advancements. I'm a false teacher on this topic.

So, with all deference to St. Peter whose life and faithfulness far exceed my own, I'm going to suggest a small change from "teacher" language to "witness" language so we can start identifying the difference between false and true. I don't think

Peter will mind since it's Peter who writes, "we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty." Peter admits that his own credibility is not found in some innate characteristic or learned intelligence, but rather that he was chosen, by grace, to stand as a witness to the Transfiguration. It is only his status as a witness that gives him credibility to speak on matters of faithful doctrine and faithful behavior.

But now we're faced with another challenge, namely that the eyewitnesses to these events have been dead for nearly two thousand years. Peter's rhetoric, in his moment and for his original audience, is undeniable. It does struggle, though, to make the multi-millennia journey to us today. As such, we're going to need some sense of what makes a reliable witness versus its alternative. For this, we should attend closely to the story of the Transfiguration.

Humility. That's the first and most important characteristic to a good witness. Humility, to be clear, is often hard-won. Like, for instance, when Peter pipes up and starts going on and on about building shelters for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, only to have the brightness of God's glory and the thunderous boom of God's voice send Peter to his face in sphincter-clenching fear. *That's* the humility I'm talking about. And this humility has been a theme for Peter in the days leading up to the Transfiguration. Just check out this series of events...

- In Matthew 16:13-20 we witness Peter get the right answer to Jesus' question of "But who do you say that I am?" He's gotta be riding high. The Messiah, the Son of the living God, just said "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah!"
- But then! In Matthew 16:23 Jesus turns and says, "Get behind me, Satan!" to Peter because Peter was trying to rebuke Jesus for saying that He had to die.
- Finally, Jesus gives all the disciples arguably the hardest lesson to hear, learn, and embody. In Matthew 16:24-25, Jesus says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

When we speak of humility in the church, it's gotta be more than quiet politeness. As Midwesterners, we should know better than anyone in the world that quiet politeness can hide metric tons of unspoken judgment and passive aggression. Humility, as Peter learns it, is about letting the grace of God wipe the egg off your face and letting the grace of God lift you up off your face.

Humility is a central part of being a good witness because being a good witness inherently means you're not the primary actor, that you're not the one in control. This was Peter's problem with his attempts to build those three shelters. He knew he was in a blessed place, but instead of receiving it graciously, he – quite literally – attempted to

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domesticate it. God's blessings will not be domesticated by our wills and work.

Being a witness means being convinced that God is at work in the world – both in the past and presently. *This* is why *we* can still be witnesses. It's not that we're witnesses to the Transfiguration, but we *are* witnesses to the ways that God is moving in the world around us. We work, together as a community, to faithfully follow – to take up our crosses and follow God – and along the way, we witness God at work. We witness this work when the sick are healed, but we also witness this work when the faithful saints of God can face death with peace and gratitude in their hearts, like our friend Bill Crone. We witness in and through our worship of God, especially when the rest of the world would appear to only worship money, power, and pleasure. We witness when we meet sin with grace, instead of the world's way of meeting sin with shame (as if, of course, shame has ever motivated anyone to actually do better).

Finally, we witness through our proclamation. This is why Peter – 50 years on – is still talking about what he has seen. His witness can be a humble, self-dying followship of God at work in the world, but it is incomplete until it is proclaimed. Simply put, Peter didn't get that mountaintop experience with Jesus, Moses, and Elijah *only* to have his own heart strengthened in the Lord. He received it that it might benefit and edify the entire people of God. Oh, and the fact that we're still reading the words of his witness 2,000 years later is good evidence that his witness is still being proclaimed.

So, that's witness. It is the humble, self-dying followship of God at work in the world and our proclamation of what God is doing. But since 2 Peter began us with “false teachers,” or in the logic of this sermon, “false witnesses,” we should also explore the markers of this, so as to better avoid it in our own lives. Briefly, then, a false witness is one bent on control, strategy, and efficacy. We've already mentioned the folly of control when we witnessed Peter try to domesticate the Transfiguration with three shelters. Strategy and efficacy as follies mostly follow from this instinct to control. “Strategy” names the way we try to judiciously enact our control, but that's just putting lipstick on a pig if control isn't something we're supposed to have in the first place. So, let's focus on efficacy, because that's where Presbyterians falter the most.

Quickly, how many of you were academic rockstars in grade school? Show of hands. Good. How about high school? Got good grades? Oh, do we have any Valedictorians in the room? C'mon. Don't be shy; raise'em high. Good. Who here has a Bachelors degree? A Master's degree? Who here has reached a PhD or other terminal degree status? And even if you don't have any of the degrees, you've chosen to come to a Presbyterian church, which makes you a certified genius in my book. So, you see what highly gifted, intelligent, capable

people we are? And do you know what highly gifted, intelligent, and capable people want to achieve? Efficacy. We want our best laid plans to work. It starts, at least it started for me, when I got my first “A” on a report card in first grade, and that little pride-demon harries my soul to this day.

Efficacy, however, is not part of witnessing because witnessing isn't about what we're doing, but rather about what God is doing. The yardstick by which we measure our lives is not and cannot be what we achieved, but rather what we received... and then how well we shared that. God is, in the brilliant words of the theologian Karl Barth, the “Subject” of the world and we are the “Object.” Quick grammar lesson: The Subject always acts on the Object – not the other way around.

You might protest, though, that if we aren't to be effective, then why do we do missions and outreach like we do? Why the Deacon Shop? Why support the personal needs pantry at First Christian? Why send money to Turkey and Syria? We still do those works as our acts of witness, not as works of efficacy. And to that, I say “Thanks be to God!” If we were judged by our works' efficacy, we'd be hell bound for certain. Because try as we might, I don't think we've supplied even enough toilet paper or tampons for our community's needs. If efficacy is our yardstick, we just got a D-minus, which we've already determined this congregation probably can't stomach, you know, being the high-achieving nerds and genius Presbyterians that we are. But as an act of *witness* to a God who loves people in all their bodily needs, our giving does rise to the occasion. Our \$1,000-plus to Turkey and Syria isn't going to repair the effects of that earthquake, but it will stand as a testimony to the God who unites us all together by dint of both our creation and salvation in God.

And this brings us back around to humility, which is where witness begins, because we want to see Turkey and Syria restored and we want to see the bodily needs of our community met, but we can't do it alone. We have to wait and trust and watch for God to do this work. This work may come in the form of international aid, NGO labors, and interpersonal benevolence, but for those who are trained as witnesses of God, we will see the hands of the One we worship here today at work in it all. As witnesses we exist to point and say, “Look. There. There is God's love at work.”

So, let us now turn to this Table, whose meal is far too small to *effectively* fill our bellies, but come to it as witnesses prepared to see our God's sustaining presence in it and with us. To receive these elements that are transfigured into body and blood for us, and to be able to say, “See. Look. There. There is God's love at work.”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.