

CALL WAITING - 'YOU WILL BE MY WITNESSES'  
A SERMON BASED ON ACTS 1:1-11  
PREACHED AT CHIPPAWA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
NIAGARA FALLS, ONTARIO  
SUNDAY, MAY 14, 2017  
10:00 a.m.

There was the time an advocate knocked at the door of our house.

He showed up unannounced at lunch time.

He had a badge on his shirt,  
a clip board in his hand,  
and a pamphlet to give out.

He wanted to know if Wendy, who had answered the door  
or anyone else in the house,  
golfed.

None of us at our house do.

But that didn't stop him from advocating.

He wanted to know if any of our friends or family golfed.

Because he had an amazing opportunity.

What he had would make a great gift.

He advocated.

He advocated for a golf package he was selling.

He advocated for its value over the course of the summer.

The beauty of the courses that could be played.

The number of times the recipient could play.

He was annoying.

Wendy sent him away.

I myself am generally not too keen on advocates.

They always call at supper time.

They ask me what I want in a political platform.

Then they advocate to gain my support.

Advocates yell at me from my facebook news feed.

They flash pictures of animals being horribly treated

putting up the worst picture of abused animals they can find.

Then they ask me how I could consider eating meat?

The facebook advocates ask me to share if I agree.

The Alberta oil sands are bad.

Cycling is great, cars should be banned.

Greater gun control is needed  
Whale hunting should be stopped worldwide.  
Every single disease needs to be eradicated.  
A political party needs to be supported,  
or defeated.

While I have opinions, some strongly held, on many things,

I don't really enjoy being near advocates.

They provoke arguments,

because the nature of their conversation is argument.

They are trying to make a case.

Advocates bring out lawyers for the defence.

Advocates engender arguments.

Political arguments.

Economic arguments.

Environmental arguments.

Family arguments.

Religious arguments.

Rather than insightful conversation

about important issues

what I often end up seeing is a lot of hostility.

I tend to read my news online.

I have to work at staying away from the comments sections

at the bottom,

because not only are there advocates there in the comments section,

there are a lot of judges.

Judges

reaching decisions,

jumping to conclusions and declaring verdicts.

That's wrong.

He's guilty.

She's a fool.

He needs to be hanged.

She should be fired.

He's a saint.

We should all listen to her.

Those who disagree with the judgement provide their own judgements.

You're ignorant.

Oh, yeah, you can't spell.

Can't has an apostrophe. You're ignorant.

Advocates and judges.

They can be tough to be around.

Very few like to be pushed into a position,  
imposed upon, evaluated or judged.

At least few people that I've met.

This is also true in matters of faith.

perhaps, especially true.

We have all experienced them, friends and family members  
who have embarrassed us,

or made us really uncomfortable,

with their advocacy of faith,

in their judgement of others' faith or absence of faith.

They have said things like,

‘You really need to come to church.’

‘You have to repent, pray this prayer, confess your sin,  
ask Jesus into your heart,  
or you are going to hell.’

‘You have to believe this because what you believe is wrong,  
or inadequate, or empty.’

‘You are making a mess of your life and you need Jesus to fix it.’

‘That church you are going to is not a biblical church, not a real church.’

Now and again I get phone calls from those who are looking for a church.

They will have questions about us.

A few weeks ago I was asked,  
what I wear on a Sunday.

Now, I think the caller was trying to determine  
if we were traditional, with me in clerical robes,  
or contemporary, wearing more usual clothes,  
but still, the thought of someone judging me  
based on what I wear,  
it makes me nervous.

What if Denver Hayes doesn't cut it?

We have felt pushed and judged.

We have watched others advocate and judge

and we've been embarrassed.

Advocates and judges are tough to be around.

We know that.

We know it so deeply and instinctively that a core value in our culture

has become live and let live.

Or it's negative version, you can't tell me how to live.

And with the core value, a derivative belief.

You telling me how to live, and what to think or believe,

makes you an intolerant, prejudiced, dogmatic, partisan bigot.

So when it comes to sharing our faith,

or telling people what we believe, or why we believe,

we can be paralyzed by the fear of being thought an advocate

or a judge.

When Jesus gives the command in Matthew 28,

Go and make disciples of all the nations.

Baptizing them.

Teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

We end up terrified.

It feels like we are being signed up for the next round  
of the crusades.

We don't want to be crusaders.

We know advocates and judges aren't very well liked.

We want to be liked.

We know that suggesting how someone might live,  
could get us labelled a religious fanatic,  
or worse, an intolerant bigot,

Canadian born Leighton Ford was the associate evangelist  
in the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association,  
often preaching for him at crusades.

In one of his books he shares the result of a survey  
given to those attending training sessions  
for one of the Billy Graham crusades that took place in Detroit.

One question asked was,



"What is your greatest hindrance in sharing your faith?"

9% said they were too busy to remember to do it.

28% felt the lack of real information to share.

None said they didn't really care.

12% said their own lives were not speaking as they should.

But by far the largest group

were the 51% whose biggest problem

was the fear of how the other person would react.

We know advocates and judges aren't well liked.

We don't want to be 'that religious person'.

I personally want to be faithful in my call to make disciples,  
to share my faith.

But I am definitely one of the 51%.

If you have a huge hunk of spinach in your teeth,

I will have to muster up courage to let you know.

I don't want to embarrass you.

I don't want to be uncomfortable

by pointing out something

that will make you uncomfortable.

This is why I adore Acts 1.

It's a passage that says, 'You can do this.'

You can make disciples without being 'that guy.'

Acts 1 is what I call a border passage.

It is a passage that once you pass through it,

once you go over its bridge,

you are in different territory.

Luke, the author of the book of Acts, gives us some clues

that we are moving into new territory.

First he tells us that his former book was about what Jesus

began to do and teach.

Implying that this book, is the continuation of what Jesus began.

The second clue is the fact that the resurrected Jesus

appeared to the disciples over a period of 40 days.

40 days is the Bible's gestation period.

If I said, that's going to take 9 months before it's ready,  
you might hear the echo of how long a pregnancy is.

When you hear the phrase '40 days' in the Bible,  
you can be pretty sure something is pregnant.

Something new is coming on the other side of that time.

After Noah built the ark,  
it rained 40 days and 40 nights.  
It was a new beginning for God and his people.

Moses was on Mount Sinai for 40 days  
when he received the 10 commandments and brought them down  
to the people,  
transforming how they would be in relationship with their God.

Jesus was in the desert 40 days before he declared his ministry in  
Nazareth,  
chose his disciples,  
and began to preach and heal.

And here,

in the book of Acts,

the disciples have 40 days of encounters with Jesus.

It is the pause, the bridge, before crossing into the new territory.

Before the birth of a new thing.

Jesus has given the instruction to the disciples to wait.

Don't go yet.

Do not leave Jerusalem

but wait for the gift my Father promised

which you have heard me speak about.

John baptized with water.

But in a few days,

you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

It will be new territory for you.

Jerusalem, all Judea, Samaria,

and to the ends of the earth.

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you.

You will be called to testify.

You will be my witnesses.

This is the great news.

We get to be witnesses.

It's golden.

Advocates and judges are tough to be around.

But people want to hear from a witness.

“How was the movie?

How was the restaurant?

How was the vacation?

Where did you stay?

What was it like?

Who cuts your hair?

Where did you get your lawn mower?

We want to hear from witnesses.

What was it you saw?

Four years ago, there was a horrible murder

of a young soldier in England.

Mrs. Kennett was there that day, and in her actions,

became a national hero.

She had been travelling by bus on her way to central London,  
when she saw a man lying in the road.

She got off the bus to help and realized  
the man's killers were still present.

She went up and spoke with them.

“Would you like to give me what you have in your hands?”

He didn't.

One said he wanted to shoot the police when they came.

That he wanted to kill them.

She didn't leave.

She said,

“That's not going to happen. I am here.

And I am going to listen to you.”

She kept the attackers calm and distracted until help arrived.

Then the requests for interviews started.

People wanted her account, her testimony, her witness.

Why did you do it?

How did you do it?

Tell us the story.

She shared,

‘A woman from the crowd told me to step back.

I told her, I wasn’t leaving;

as long as I don’t see professionals here, I’m staying.

He knows me;

he knows I’m calm.

I’m not afraid whatsoever.

I’ll stay until something happens.’

A reporter who was writing about the story noted,

“Around her neck, she wears a small gold cross,

encrusted with rubies and diamonds.’

She is a practising Catholic,

and she credited her faith for how she acted.

She gave witness to her faith.

She said,

“I live my life as a Christian.”

She quoted Jesus.

“I believe in thinking about others  
and loving my neighbour.

We have a duty to look after each other.””

Her faith is why she did what she did.

People wanted to hear from her.

Why did you do it?

How did you do it?

She was called to testify and she gave witness.

She credited her faith for how she acted.

She gave Jesus’ words and her testimony has travelled the world.

Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria to the ends of the earth.

We are not called to be advocates in this new territory.

We are not God’s defence attorneys.

Nor is it our job to make the case for God.

Neither have been given the role of judge.

We don’t have to evaluate, make decisions, nor stand over anyone.



That is not what we are called to do.

Jesus said you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you.

You will have power to be witnesses.

If you read through the book of Acts,

one of the amazing things you will see,

is that every time the Holy Spirit shows up and is mentioned,

it is in a moment of testifying,

preaching, proclaiming, witnessing, telling the story.

You might expect the Holy Spirit would show up for supernatural activity.

Signs and wonders and miracles and lightning strikes.

But that isn't when the Holy Spirit gets the shout out.

It is when someone gives testimony.

In Acts 2 when the Holy Spirit came,

the disciples could speak in other languages

and all nationalities could hear the gospel.

Peter who had denied Christ,

was filled with the Holy Spirit

and then spoke boldly before the authorities  
when called on to give testimony.

Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit when he gave his testimony

Whenever someone was filled with the Holy Spirit in Acts.

it is for the power to testify,

the power to witness

The promise of God,

is the gift and the power of the Holy Spirit when we witness.

Our call is not to be advocates or judges,

but witnesses,

You are not called on to defend the faith,

or pass judgement on others, or on the church.

There's a story about a young salesman

who was disappointed about losing a big sale,

and as he talked with his sales manager he lamented,

"I guess it just proves you can lead a horse to water

but you can't make him drink."

The manager replied, "Son, take my advice:

your job is not to make him drink.

Your job is to make him thirsty."

But people are already thirsty

thirsty for hope,

and for joy, and for compassion and love.

We don't have to water board them.

We have to tell them where the water is,

and tell them who quenched our thirst.

You are called to witness to your experience of Christ.

You will be asked to give your testimony.

You will be called to testify,

When people see your generosity and kindness.

You will be called to witness.

When people see the love you freely share with a neighbour.

You will be called to witness.

When people see your hope in the face of challenge and pain.

You will be called to witness.

When people see your character of

patience and kindness and self-control,

aspects of the fruit of the Spirit,

they are going to ask you where you got that.

Your call is to tell them.

Tell them your experience.

Tell them your story. Provide witness.

The Holy Spirit is powerfully present in those moments.

Tell them your before.

Your life before you knew Jesus and how you met him.

Or if you've always known Jesus,

tell them how you learned to love Jesus.

in Sunday School, in your home, from a friend, at camp.

Then once you've told them your before,

tell them what it was

that changed it for you,

that made you want to be a follower of Jesus.

Then finally, tell them what it means to you to follow Jesus today.

Tell them before.

Tell them what changed.

Tell them after.

Give your testimony.

Be a witness.

Thomas Henry Huxley,

was a brilliant biologist from England who lived in the 1800's

He was a well-known agnostic.

The story is told that he was with a group of men

at a weekend house party.

On Sunday morning, while most of them were preparing to go to church,

he approached a man known for his Christian character and said,

"Suppose you stay at home and tell me why you are a Christian."

The man, knowing he couldn't match wits with Huxley, hesitated.

But the agnostic said gently, "I don't want to argue with you."

I just want you to tell me simply what this Christ means to you."

The man did, and when he finished,

there were tears in Huxley's eyes as he said,

"I would give my right hand if only I could believe that!"

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you.

You will be witnesses to the ends of the earth.

Tell your story. God has given you the power to do so.

Testify.

Share who you were before meeting Jesus.

Tell how you came to meet and trust Jesus.

Share who you are now because of Jesus.

You are called to be witnesses.

Jesus said, you will be my witnesses.

So when the opportunity comes to you,

give witness.

Amen.