

## “Spirit of Witness”

Acts 1: 6-14

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Rev. Mary Kay Sauter

United Church of Christ in New Brighton

While cleaning out our house in one of our moves Orv came across a button that said, “God doesn’t side with one group, religions do that.” Then I saw a bumper sticker that said, “Dear Lord, save me from your followers.” Because of the truism in the button as well as some other reasons, I can understand why someone would use the bumper sticker. I wonder how those followers of Jesus including his mother and brothers, those filled with the spirit, who gathered together would think of the religion that came into existence through their efforts. I wonder what Jesus would think of the religion that came into existence because of him. I wonder what God thinks of this religion.

My guess is that there are some things they take great delight in and some things not so much. I can’t imagine God, or Jesus or his followers who were filled with the spirit, valuing, those who because they believe a particular way also believe that whatever they do must be what God wants them to do and, in the process, people are hurt. I can’t imagine God, or Jesus or the followers who were filled with the spirit would be okay with power over—whether it is abuse in our homes, the work place, wars fought for flimsy reasons, medical care being pulled for the most vulnerable in a state, balancing budgets on the backs of the poor and the middle class, not getting protective gear to those who need it during this pandemic. I can’t imagine God, or Jesus or the followers who were filled with the spirit valuing anything other than fullness of life, justice and mercy, sharing God’s love as Jesus did with those around him, particularly the most vulnerable.

Whether Jesus rose into the heavens with angels surrounding him is irrelevant to me. I don’t care if he did or not. I don’t care if it means we have eternal life—that’s sweet to imagine, but who really knows—I do believe that because we worship a God who loves us that whatever is next will be good. We need to remember that these

stories were written 30-plus years after Jesus died. There were power struggles taking place and everyone wanted God on their side. Writings pulled from stories of Greek and Roman gods, were an attempt to be the one true religion. I’m not the only one who says this. Ralph Milton a religious author and commentator wrote this. “Some years ago, Charles Templeton (a one-time evangelist turned atheist) wrote a book that had someone finding a skeleton in Jerusalem that turned out to be Jesus. In the book, the church was desperately concerned that such a discovery would destroy Christianity, because it would prove that Christ’s bodily resurrection was fiction.

I remember thinking at the time – what’s the big deal? Such a discovery wouldn’t damage my faith at all. And as I now read this passage from the Book of Acts and remember that book, I find my thoughts haven’t changed.” He goes on to say, “Like so much biblical truth, the message is contained in the story. Jesus’ earthly ministry is done. Now it is the Christ that works in us through the Spirit.

No, I’m not calling Luke, thought to be the author of the book of Acts, a liar. The “men of Galilee” were Jews and many expressed their convictions in stories rather than propositions. If anything, this truth is more powerful and persuasive because it comes to us as a story rather than as a set of objectively provable (or disprovable) facts.” Stories are about relationships and so is our faith.

Fiction writers have the freedom to explore these possibilities. “The Templar Legacy” by Steve Berry—a mystery/intrigue book. In it, among the Templar treasures that are found, there’s a letter from Peter along with some bones. It raises the same concerns as the previous author—if Jesus didn’t ascend then what does that mean to Christianity. The author, Berry has Peter describe Jesus in this way. “The man Jesus spent many years

spreading his message throughout the lands of Judea and Galilee. I was the first of his followers, but our number grew since many believed his words possessed great meaning. We traveled with him watching as he eased suffering, brought hope, and stirred salvation. He was always himself, no matter the day or event. If the masses lauded him, he faced them. When hostility surrounded him, he showed no rage or fear. What others thought of him, said or did never affected him. He said once, 'All of us bear God's image, all are worthy to be loved, all can grow in the spirit of God.' I watched as he embraced lepers and the immoral. Women and children were precious to him. He showed me that all were worthy of love. He would say, "God is our father. He cares, loves and forgives. No sheep will ever be lost from the shepherd. Feel free to tell God all, for only in such openness can the heart gain peace." Amazing where we can hear the word of God.

If you're concerned about this theology coming from a fiction writer here's what Berry says in his Writer's Notes at the end. The Gospel of Simon is my creation. But the alternate concept of how Christ may have been 'resurrected' came from an excellent book. "Resurrection, Myth or Reality" by John Shelby Spong. Berry has Simon write about digging up Jesus' bones and then write, "All doubt left me. Grief vanished. Confusion became clarity. The man Jesus was not dead. He was alive. Resurrected within me was the risen Lord. I felt his presence as clearly as when he once stood beside me. I recalled what he said to me many times. "Simon, if you love me you will find my sheep." I finally knew that loving as he loved will allow anyone to know the Lord. Doing as he did will allow us all to know the lord. Living as he lived is the way to salvation. God had come from heaven to dwell within the man Jesus and through his deeds and words the Lord became known. The message was clear. Care for the needy, comfort the distressed, befriend the rejected. Do those things and the Lord will be pleased. God took the man Jesus's life so that we could see. I was merely the first to accept that truth. The task became clear. The message must live through me and others who likewise believe."

So, again my question would God, Jesus and the followers who were filled with the spirit be pleased with what the world has done to their understanding of God and the life of Jesus and the ministry they began—a ministry following in the footsteps of Jesus. The reality is that some would be, some not—just as today there are mixed reviews on religion in general.

So how do we live as faithful people? First, we don't get stuck in absolutes for God is still speaking. Since God is more than we can ever imagine we need to give God room to be that more—more love, more compassion, more justice seeking, more peacemaking—more of everything we believe God is about. Secondly, we are open to that God so that true peace does live within us and we can be guided by God, take risks and live faithfully. Thirdly we trust in God so that the "more" of God can live through us. Because of that trust we are called to and need to "Care for the needy, comfort the distressed, befriend the rejected." Fourth, we never underestimate the love God has for the whole of creation and that we are called to love all of this creation as well. We are called to be inclusive, to provide radical hospitality for all people, to not divide people into groups and accept some and reject others. We never underestimate the power of that love and what can happen if we are open to it.

There was a small church in Wisconsin where, for the most part, people did a wonderful ministry—they were small town, more conservative. There was a couple in the church that all they had to do was to frown or smile and everyone knew which way they should vote on an issue. They held the power. It was around the time that Open and Affirming was first being explored and the leadership in the Wisconsin Conference of the United Church of Christ was holding conference wide gatherings to explore what this meant. The pastor, who was gay, but not out, wisely chose this couple to go to the meeting. He eagerly awaited their return wondering what they would think of this for he knew their approval or disapproval would make a difference. First the man spoke to the congregation and gave his report—sharing with the congregation some of his concerns and his

questions, but ultimately thought it would be okay. Then his wife spoke and was clear—if we are faithful people this is the way to go. When they left for the meeting, they had not been supporters of Open and Affirming. The Spirit witnessed to them and moved in their hearts and minds and they were changed, and the congregation was changed. However, they were open to the possibilities. They weren't closed off and rigid.

I don't believe God caused the pandemic, but I believe it can be used by God to aid in our transformation. Yes, we hear stories of people behaving badly—scamming and hacking and taking advantage of others. But I hear more stories of people caring, of sharing God's love whether they know that's what they're doing or not. The restaurant owners who share their food with front line workers and food shelves and keep their employees working and paid. The frontline workers who work overtime, sometimes not in healthy conditions and those who raise the concern about these unhealthy conditions. The graduation and birthday party caravans. The mask making. The donations to food shelves. Those working with the most vulnerable among us like AVIVO. The care and compassion shown to neighbors, strangers, family and friends. Phone calls checking on each other. All the music—stars singing virtually, ZOOM music events by church groups that we've gotten and sent to you including those from the National Youth Event, Hawaiian churches, and remember the Halleluiah Chorus one? On last night's news all bugle and trumpet players are invited to play taps at 3:00 tomorrow, from your deck or front porch in honor of those who have died for our country. ZOOM has become our best friend with families all getting together after many years—(read Beth's note we sent out yesterday). Churches have more people attending church via ZOOM. And I know of only one person who missed a meeting since we

started ZOOM meetings. Bible Study has grown. The pandemic didn't happen so these other events would, but it is part of God making the best possible happen. As we seek new ways to be that spirit of witness.

There are so many possibilities for sharing God's love, God's words of hope, God's radical inclusiveness, God's way that can transform the world. Too many people are asking to be saved from God's followers, religion is seen as siding with groups, religion is being used to bring about divisiveness, rigidity, callousness towards others, abuse of the most vulnerable among us. Your message of hope, of inclusiveness, of welcome, of God's incredible love for all creation is an exciting message to share. It involves a loving, healthy relationship with God—a relationship built on trust and love, rather than abuse or suffering. It is a relationship that leads to good, wholesome, live-giving, meaning-filled transformation which I believe is what God wants for all people and what the world so desperately needs especially during this time.

It seems to me that if we love God and we care/love our families, neighbors and friends, that we'd want as many people as possible to be part of a community of faith that believes in this spirit—you are that community of faith. And I know you want others to know God's messages of hope and God's love for all. Invite people to come and be a part of this community of faith. I'd really like to know who was in the car that had that bumper sticker on their car—"Dear Lord, please save me from your followers." I'd like to invite them to this community of faith and then see what their prayer would be.

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