

A Sermon Preached at Maple Street Congregational Church, UCC
Danvers, MA
Rev. Kevin M Smith
May 28, 2017
Acts 1:6-11

A Witness for Love

When I was little, the first twelve years of my life was spent going to a pretty conservative, fundamentalist church. They read the Bible literally and many of the messages from the pulpit truly put the “fear of God” in you. And, by fear I don’t mean “awe” or “respect,” which are alternative definitions of the word “fear,” used in the Bible. I mean I was *afraid* of God. I was scared to death that I would do something wrong that would land me in a place of eternal fire. This fear didn’t happen by chance. It was preached frequently from the pulpit of that church. (I started feeling a whole lot better about God and serving God and trusting in God when my parents took us out of that church and we started attending the little Presbyterian church down the road from our home.)

Now, one of the things I did like about that early church were the potlucks after the worship service and the pick-up softball games we used to play in the church lot. It was the one time where joy seemed to fill the air rather than the fear and condemnation we heard at other times. And now that I think about that, the preacher’s sermons and pick-up softball games actually had some things in common:

You see, St. Peter and Satan were having an argument one day about baseball. Satan proposed a game to be played on neutral grounds between a select team from the heavenly host and his own hand-picked boys. "Very well," said the gatekeeper of Heaven. "But you realize, I hope, that we've got all the good players and the best coaches." "I know, and that's all right," Satan answered unperturbed. "We've got all the umpires." (<http://jokes.skem9.co.uk/cat/Heaven-and-hell-jokes/>)

The God I learned about as a young boy was a lot like those guys dressed in black whose sole purpose was keeping everyone in line and obeying the rules and calling people out who were only trying to get home. Sometimes the umpires, the men in black, threw players out of the game. Maybe that’s why I grew up to be such a big baseball fan. Baseball is very much like life – there are bases we all have to cover to get to our destination and we are all just trying get home. Sadly, it seemed, at my childhood church there were way too many people who didn’t get home safely, they were called out by that big umpire in the sky.

One of the things we used to do in that early church was have Wednesday night prayer meetings. These services always had two things happening—altar calls and a time to for people to give their witness. The altar calls always came after the hellfire and damnation sermon and people were invited up to the front of the church where there was an altar with nice padded places so you could kneel down and pray, confessing and having a lay

minister pray with you. My Dad was one of those lay ministers who would go up to the altar and pray with people who were often in tears.

The time during the service for “witnessing” came later. People would stand up where they were in the pews and they would tell the whole congregation all the wonderful things God had done for them. Many told stories of being hurt terribly by life and how their faith had given them hope and joy and they felt such love for and from God. This time was so counter to the messages of Godly punishment and condemnation that often came down from the pulpit earlier in the service. Giving witness was of time of joyful tears shed rather than fearful sobs.

We read this morning from the Book of Acts that Jesus told his disciples, “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Jesus was getting his disciples ready to receive the Holy Spirit into their lives (which we will celebrate next Sunday at Pentecost) and he was commissioning them to go out into the world and be witnesses for him. He was giving them the personal power and instilling within them the urge to spread the joy, the power, and the meaning of what it means to serve love, to serve God. He wasn’t badgering them or threatening them if they didn’t tow the line—he was inspiring them to love and to do good works and to let the world know. Jesus was asking them to be witnesses for all the good and meaningful things God had done for them in this life. He was not inspiring them through darkness and fear, but through the power of light and love. He was encouraging them to action by their witness.

Martine Luther King, Jr. once said, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.” In this troubled time in our world today we need to be witnesses for love, not purveyors of darkness, exclusion, and hate. There is too much darkness and hate spreading in our public life today inspiring people to prejudice and fear. Way too much hate and fear has gone viral.

As followers of Jesus, we should not stand idly by while our neighbors who have different religions, or different skin colors, or different-sized pocketbooks, or who are simply seeking the kind of opportunities we have in this country, are condemned and not welcome in many churches for who they love. Holocaust survivor and advocate for love and justice, Elie Wiesel, said,

"The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. The opposite of beauty is not ugliness, it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, but indifference between life and death." (Interview with U.S. media, 1986,
<http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/elie-wiesel-quotes-survival-spirituality-humanity-article-1.2697132>)

Let us not be indifferent, but rather be witnesses to love of God that is meant to be shared with all our neighbors. People fought and died for this country so that other people could feel safe and have the freedom to be just who they are. Let us not stand idly

by looking up to heaven as those disciples we read about this morning were doing, let us actively witness to God's love for one another and those outside the walls of this church. May we witness with our words to one another and with the lives we lead and the actions we take in this church. Let this witness begin in our homes by treating our family members with compassion and kindness, and then let's take that love out into the streets of our world. Be a witness for love. Amen.