

Welcome

Maybe the worst thing you could have in the church I grew up in was a bad testimony.

About twice a year, my parents would go on what were called Lay Witness Missions - they were basically weekend revivals led entirely by volunteers - non-professional pastors - who would come from all over the midwest to a church for a weekend. They'd have a whole weekend of singing, prayer, preaching and sharing, and testimonies were a big part of it.

I was going on these literally before I was born, so the team became sort of an extended family - adopted aunts and uncles. And it was always a *big* deal when Ron was able to come on a mission.

I don't remember much about Ron except how incredibly kind he was - he was one of those people who put an instant smile on your face, made you feel welcomed and warm. That was part of the reason everyone loved Ron, but the main thing people loved was when, at some point in the weekend, Ron would share his testimony.

Apparently, Ron had been an unwanted pregnancy, and his teenage mother had tried to drink Drano to terminate her pregnancy. It hadn't worked, but it left Ron with life-long pains and disabilities. When Ron told his story - of being unwanted by his mom, of a life full of challenges, of learning to be loved by God, there wasn't a dry eye in the place. His story was incredibly powerful.

Everybody loved Ron. And everybody *hated* having to give their testimony the same night as Ron. I remember the weekend the leader, Jerry, asked me to share. I was honored - I was only about 12 at the time, and I had *no* idea what I was doing. But I was feeling pretty confident until I saw the order of service and saw *Ron* was sharing after me.

I was a 12-year old kid living in a suburb of KC. I attended a great school. What was I going to say? That I fought with my siblings? Maybe I could church that up a bit, say one of them had shanked me one time? I didn't have a dark past - maybe I could insert some minor felonies during my dark fourth grade year?

I have no idea what I said that night, but I still remember the feeling I had of inadequacy. When someone asked me to share my story of God, I felt like I had nothing to offer. Because I wasn't a pastor, I had nothing to say. Because I didn't have a miraculous story of how God rescued me, I had nothing to offer.

I want to talk today about our testimonies. The Scriptures call it 'bearing witness'. The \$10 word is Evangelism (which has all sorts of other baggage). But the question today is, What does it look like for us to invite people to experience new life in Jesus?

The truth is: I was wrong back then. God doesn't require a dramatic story or deep bible knowledge. What it takes to invite people into life with Jesus is simply a transformed life.

Message

Today is Pentecost! Pentecost is 50 days after Easter, and it's the day we celebrate when God gave the Holy Spirit to us. For the last seven weeks, we've been exploring the various "I Am" statements in John's Gospel, the places where Jesus has claimed to be God - and not just God, but the God who matters in our ordinary, everyday lives. The God of our Mondays, not just our Sundays.

But today, we're going to talk about another person of the Trinity - the Holy Spirit.

[Scripture Slide 1] The traditional Pentecost story is found in Acts 2 - it's where the disciples are gathered, praying after Jesus ascended to Heaven, and the Spirit falls on them like tongues of flame. Everyone starts speaking in different languages and like 5,000 people get saved.

It's very dramatic. I get a sort of 'Ron's testimony' feeling when I read the Pentecost story in Acts. It's *amazing* and inspiring, but it also feels pretty removed from my experience.

John's version of Pentecost is different. So today, since we've been in John's Gospel since Lent, I want to look at what John says about the Spirit. We're going to be hopping all over the book this morning, but we're going to begin in John 15. This is the same farewell discourse where Jesus claims to be the True Vine. Jesus knows he's going to be crucified soon, so he's leaving his followers with some final wisdom. Central to his encouragement is the promise that he's not leaving them alone:

I will send you the Advocate—the Spirit of truth. He will come to you from the Father and will testify all about me. And you must also testify about me because you have been with me from the beginning of my ministry. -- John 15:26-27

Just like Jesus did, the Spirit will point us to God, invite us into God's life. And then Jesus tells his followers that *they too* will have to testify about him. Somehow, the Spirit is the one who enables us to bear witness about Jesus to the world.

This isn't the first time Jesus has mentioned the Holy Spirit in John. Back in chapter 7, Jesus does something strange. He goes into the Temple and stands on the steps, facing toward the East, and makes a big announcement:

On the last day, the climax of the festival, Jesus stood and shouted to the crowds, "Anyone who is thirsty may come to me! Anyone who believes in me may come and drink! For the Scriptures declare, 'Rivers of living water will flow from his heart.'" (When he said "living water," he was speaking of the Spirit, who would be given to everyone believing in him. But the Spirit had not yet been given, because Jesus had not yet entered into his glory.) -- John 7:37-39

Jesus is acting out a vision of the prophet Ezekiel here. Ezekiel saw the original Temple destroyed by Babylon, and lived in the aftermath of the destruction. God gives him a vision of the Temple rebuilt. But

it's more than just the restoration of the Temple. As Ezekiel watches, the Temple's doors burst open and a river flows directly from the Holy of Holies, where God's physical presence is.

As Ezekiel watches, the river flows East from Jerusalem through the Judean desert all the way to the Dead Sea. And everywhere the river flows, life erupts, until even the Dead Sea is teeming with all kinds of life.

In other words, this river that flows from the Temple, from the very heart of God, is a river of new life, a river of resurrection.

And now Jesus stands on the steps *of the Temple* and offers a river of living water from his heart. And John tells us this river is the Spirit.

The Spirit is the source of God's new life. It's why Paul refers to the Spirit as 'the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead'. The Spirit witnesses to God by bringing new life.

[Scripture Slide 2] John shows us what that looks like in John 4.

Jesus is travelling through Samaria. Without getting into the whole history, it's safe to say Jews and Samaritans *hated* each other in Jesus' day. Today, we'd identify it as racial prejudice.

We don't know a lot about this woman, but it's pretty clear that she's an outcast even in her own community - she comes to the well where she meets Jesus alone, which means she wasn't welcome to go to the well with the rest of the women in town. She has a painful, possibly shameful past - she's had five different husbands and is now living with a man who isn't her husband.

In other words, she's the last person you'd expect a respectable JEWISH rabbi to be talking to (you'll see that the disciples are scandalized here in a moment). And more than that, she's the last person you'd expect to be talking to a rabbi. (I see this today when people find out I'm a pastor - they get all weird and awkward and start confessing deep dark sins.)

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Please give me a drink." He was alone at the time because his disciples had gone into the village to buy some food.

The woman was surprised, for Jews refuse to have anything to do with Samaritans. She said to Jesus, "You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan woman. Why are you asking me for a drink?"

Jesus replied, "If you only knew the gift God has for you and who you are speaking to, you would ask me, and I would give you living water." -- John 4:7-10

Jesus offers her *living water* (which we know is this new life bringing, resurrection river of the Holy Spirit). When, in the course of their conversation, she realizes Jesus is more than just a rabbi, she

confesses her hope that the Messiah is coming - and Jesus reveals to her (and for the first time in the Gospel!) that he is the long-awaited Messiah. That revelation transforms her, and we see she is transformed:

The woman said, “I know the Messiah is coming—the one who is called Christ. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.”

Then Jesus told her, “I AM the Messiah!”

Just then his disciples came back. They were shocked to find him talking to a woman, but none of them had the nerve to ask, “What do you want with her?” or “Why are you talking to her?” The woman left her water jar beside the well and ran back to the village, telling everyone, “Come and see a man who told me everything I ever did! Could he possibly be the Messiah?” So the people came streaming from the village to see him. -- John 4:25-30

Remember Jesus' promise that all who do good will stay in the light because they're not afraid that their deeds will be known? This woman shows us what that looks like:

We don't know why she's had 5 husbands. It could be that they all died (not uncommon in the ancient world). It could be that they've divorced her. Either way, her story is paved with pain or shame or both.

And yet she meets a God who knows her story, front to back, and loves her anyway. She meets a man who has this new life power flowing straight from his heart, flooding into her life and transforming all these places of death into life.

This is the true power of your testimony. Friends, most of us do not have a dramatic, cinematic story (I know a few of you do, and I'm grateful for your powerful stories). Most of us have pretty ordinary, undramatic lives.

But that doesn't mean we don't have places of death in our lives. Places where our sin has destroyed relationships or our own lives. It is precisely these places where the life-giving water of the Spirit flows in and transforms. And it is precisely these places that make our story worth sharing.

The woman had plenty of reasons to be ashamed and afraid of sharing her story. But once she had received the power of the Spirit, all those places of shame and pain became good news that God was making new. It was precisely the fact that her story *wasn't* perfect that made her story so good!

A story about a God who only loves perfect people isn't a good story at all - at least not for those of us who aren't perfect.

A story about a God who loves imperfect people is good news.

A story about a God who brings life to places of death is good news.

It's a story worth sharing.

As I look through my own life now, I find so much good news. I know what it's like to feel unlovable, to hate myself, to feel worthless. And I know what it's like to stand before a God who insists all of that is untrue. I know how it feels to be flooded with the life-giving waters of the Holy Spirit until I can't contain all that love, all that power, until I am overflowing with that same love.

To be changed from self-conscious to confident.

To be changed from judgmental to welcoming.

To be changed from suspicious to curious.

To be changed from cruel to kind.

Friends, all of these are things God has done in my life. They are changes that I could not accomplish on my own. They are, for me, miracles. They're not as dramatic as Ron's story, but they don't have to be. Because they're mine.

I can stand confidently in God's light not because I am perfect but because God has and is and will continue to make me new.

What about you? What are the sites of death in your life? What are the places of shame and pain? What would it look like for God to make those new?

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Jesus invites us to receive true food and drink.

1. Where in this season of Eastertide have you experienced God's power?
2. What sites of shame and pain do you find yourself still hiding in your life?
3. How can you pray that God make those new this week?

Assignment + Blessing

When God created humans, it went like this:

The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground. He breathed the breath of life into the man's nostrils, and the man became a living person. -- Genesis 2:7

I told you John's Pentecost was a little different. Here it is, echoing Genesis 2:

The disciples were meeting behind locked doors because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders. Suddenly, Jesus was standing there among them! "Peace be with you," he said. As he spoke, he showed

them the wounds in his hands and his side. They were filled with joy when they saw the Lord! Again he said, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.” Then he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. -- John 20:19-22

God is making you new. Go into the world this week and invite someone into your story. Share how God has made those places of death into places of life.

Friends, that's something to celebrate!