

The message given by Rev. Dr. Tom Zoelzer on Sunday, September 13, 2009 based on Acts 17:14-28.

## The Power of Testimony

A testimony by Pat Nordbrock – “Why God is Important in My Life” –

When I was growing up, no one but an ordained person spoke on Sunday morning during worship. I was fortunate to attend a congregation that was big enough for 2 pastors. However, I always had the sense that on Sunday morning, it was the ordained person’s job to talk and our job to listen.

No so anymore! There is a phenomenon happening in all kinds of churches that are experiencing the power of testimony. Testimony is the opportunity for all people, not just the ordained people, to talk about the meaning of God in their life. From time to time, congregations are giving people the opportunity to give their testimony.

The Rev. Dr. Lillian Daniels, a clergy person here in the Chicago area, has written a book on the subject entitled, *Tell It like it is: Reclaiming the Practice of Testimony*. It is a book about the Christian practice of giving testimony and what happened in one congregation when people including youth had the opportunity to give their testimony about God. The only rule was that God has to be central to the testimony.

People were given multiple settings to testify – morning worship, youth group meetings, committee meetings, small group sessions. Suddenly, people felt energized to explore their faith and express what they believed. It also gave them an opportunity to listen to what others

felt about God. It became a powerful experience for a congregation, and it became a way to re-vitalize the congregation.

Pastor Kim and I would like to give you an opportunity to give testimony. We are soliciting names of people who would give a testimony of the importance and meaning of God in their life, and from time to time we will invite people to share their testimony.

What would be your testimony if you were to speak about the importance or meaning of God in your life?... Perhaps you would have a great deal to say - perhaps not so much. One of the reasons that churches have study classes and discussion groups and Bible studies is so that people can explore what they believe, discover what the Bible says, and learn from others what they believe. September is a good time to start that exploration.

For some of you, today is your first opportunity to meet Pastor Kim and me. We are glad to be here! We arrived over the summer to become your transitional pastors as the congregation goes through a discernment process and search process to find new leadership for the congregation.

Our job is to love you, serve you, and guide you during this time of transition, but also our job is to challenge you to discern the will of God for your congregation as you move into your future and then find the leadership you need to get you to that future. This is why I need you to go to a cottage meeting right now. At each cottage meeting, a recorder is writing down what everyone says to five questions being asked. No names are recorded, but what you say is very important to discern where we are and what the search committee needs to know when it fills out search

papers. This is an important time to hear your testimony about the impact of Flossmoor Community Church on your life and for this community. What is your testimony about the purpose and value of the congregation?

The apostle Paul is giving testimony in scripture today. For the first time in his ministry for Christ, Paul had traveled away from his home area of modern day Turkey to the land of Alexander the Great into Macedonia, the country we now know as Greece today. On this trip he starts congregations in Philippi and Thessalonica and later Corinth.

His ministry in this part of the world was not always easy according to the book of Acts. In Philippi, he and his champion were beaten with rods and thrown into prison because Paul cured a woman of a spirit that a man was using to make money as a fortune teller. In Thessalonica, he was making converts among the Jews and Gentiles, but prominent Jews from the synagogue stirred up people in the town center about how Paul and Silas were "turning the world upside down," and they left town to keep the peace.

Eventually, Paul found his way to Athens where we have our scripture reading for today. Here, Paul gives a testimony in front of the Areopagus where great philosophies were discussed and debated. He was speaking to people who probably didn't know much about the Hebrew faith or especially about a man named Jesus. He was called a "babbler." In Greek, the word is "seed picker." Paul was seen as some hayseed with some junk philosophy.

So Paul spoke in a way that his audience would listen. He didn't condemn them. He perked their curiosity by talking about a monument to

an unknown god, and declared that the Hebrew God of Abraham was that unknown god.

Then he gave a very creation based, philosophical description of God about how we live in God and how that makes all the difference. He even quoted the Greek poet Epimenides – “in him we live and move and have our being.” And for a short time the people listened. Then he mentions the resurrection and judgment day, and he kind of loses the crowd. But for a moment, they listen.

I give testimony today for the God in whom we live and move and have our being for it makes all the difference. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the dissentient German theologian who was executed by the Nazis near the end of World War 2 put it this way: “I should like to speak of God not on the boundaries but at the centre... I therefore want to start from the premise that God should not be smuggled into some last secret place, but that God... must be in the middle of things.” Is God in the middle of things for you?

Robert Molsberry of Ohio writes: *I learned the truth at seventeen. That's the first line of a popular Janis Ian song from 1975, but also an accurate statement from my life. I was seventeen years old and I was on a big date with my new girlfriend. We were attending a concert with my parents. In the middle of the concert, my father suffered a massive heart attack, flopped across my date's lap, and died.*

*That was the end of what had been a tranquil, predictable life.*

*The one constant throughout this experience was my girlfriend, Ann. She was at my side when I just needed a presence. She was there to hold*

*me when I needed to cry. Ann provided a safe place for me. Five years later we were married.*

*"And they lived happily ever after."*

*Hardly. Life has not been a happily-ever-after affair. We had a stillborn child who never had the chance to breathe or know the love that had been waiting for her. We had a child diagnosed with leukemia who suffered untold agonies from cancer treatments before he was cured. And ten years ago I was the victim of a hit-and-run accident that left me in a wheelchair, paralyzed below the waist. We sometimes huddled together and wonder, "What's next?"*

*The truth that was revealed to me at seventeen? You might think I'd be bitter about life by now. Just look at the bad things that have happened. But the truth that I began learning in high school is just the opposite. Life is precious. The world is a grand mystery waiting to be explored. In addition to the tragedies, we have lived some remarkable adventures along the way that I wouldn't have traded for the world. There is no moment so dark that it can't be illuminated by God's grace. God doesn't keep us from harm, but God does offer grace to help us pick up the pieces and go on. Like a friend who stands by you when you're in pain, God's heart breaks when we suffer. For me, that's enough. – One man's testimony.*

I had a birthday this last week. I turned 59. I had a great day even though it was quite busy at the church that day. But I found myself several days before my birthday pondering the decades and wondering what I had accomplished or felt good about so far. So I found myself

making a list by decade of good things that had happened and challenges that I encountered. So on my list; I put down a new bike for example when I was 10 as a good thing, but going off to junior high at 13 a challenge.

What I discovered is that by and large I have had a wonderful life with some heart aches. But there have also been times I have been too timid – too timid to trust in myself, trust in God, or ask others for help. I discovered that when I trusted in new possibilities and asked God and others for help, wonderful things happened, and life was better and grander. I am not done yet. I have more to do and accomplish. My life's testimony is not complete!

What about you? What would be your testimony about your life so far? Have you done everything you want to do yet? Have you trusted in God and yourself enough to pick yourself up to do all the things you feel called to do? Whether you are 14, 59 or 94, what does God still have in mind for you? What does God have in mind for this church as it moves into its future? For if we are going to believe that "in him we live and move and have our being" God has exciting things in mind for all of us. What will be our testimony? Amen.