

“Can I Get a Witness?”

Scripture: 1 John 5:7-12

William C. Pender

OAKLAND AVENUE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, 2/26/06

One of the lost secretarial arts is the practice of taking shorthand—shorthand was a system of taking notes with a set of symbols that represented words and phrases. In shorthand, a symbol can stand for a phrase or even an entire sentence. Today’ text uses a sort of theological shorthand: a single word for not just a sentence but also a major part of our faith. Our text will speak of three witnesses that show us the way; and their matching response on our part, as we show we “got it.”

<sup>6</sup>This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one that testifies, for the Spirit is the truth. <sup>7</sup>There are three that testify: <sup>8</sup>the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three agree. <sup>9</sup>If we receive human testimony, the testimony of God is greater; for this is the testimony of God that he has testified to his Son. <sup>10</sup>Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts. Those who do not believe in God have made him a liar by not believing in the testimony that God has given concerning his Son. <sup>11</sup>And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. <sup>12</sup>Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

There are three witnesses mentioned here: water, blood, and Spirit. Water is a shorthand reference to baptism: Jesus’ baptism and ours. Blood is a shorthand reference to the very real, very human, in the flesh living of Jesus and the very costly dying of this Jesus on a cross. And Spirit is the shorthand reference to that stirring within us that our lives are more than desires, wants, pleasures, and pains.

Spirit witness...our text from 1 John is absolutely confident that Spirit will testify among us. God will not be silent. The Spirit will be present with us, even in our dignified, orderly Presbyterian worship. But the Spirit is what we sometimes seem to lose in our worship life. Maya Angelou, an African-American poet, has an autobiography entitled *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. She tells of worship life in an African-American Baptist congregation in rural Arkansas in the late 1940’s. One particular worshiper that she has never forgotten was Sister Monroe. Sister Monroe did not have any transportation and she lived too far out in the country to get to worship regularly, but when she was there, she made up for lost time by getting in the “spirit.”

Maya Angelou describes one Sunday morning in worship: Sister Monroe gets wound up one Sunday—and she is not only shouting but she charges down the aisle right at the preacher. Two male ushers cannot hold her back and she busts through them like a football player bulling his way across the goal line. She launches herself on the preacher, yelling “preach it.” Another usher tries to pull her off of the preacher and the three of them tumble down to the floor. The preacher loses his dentures but doesn’t quit preaching. Maya Angelou, a child, recounts she got

a “whuppin” when she got home for laughing for so hard.

We Presbyterians, of course, have never been known for that sort of spiritual worship. And for most of us, for good reason—we are not sure that’s the Spirit of God. But then we do tend to lose touch with what is spiritual. Spiritual is not about tastes...sometimes we get bogged down in “tastes.” I don’t like the music...I don’t like to dress up...I don’t like that some don’t dress up...I don’t like the flowers...I don’t like passing the peace...I don’t like the preaching. I don’t like someone’s facial expression. What we may miss with these “I don’t likes” is the very Spirit of God. Spirit is not about what I am feeling or not feeling—it is about where God is or is not in our lives.

Some of you may recall that C.S. Lewis did some fanciful writing that involved a devil named Wormwood. Wormwood is a rookie devil and he has a “human assignment.” Wormwood is to keep his human assignment from falling into the hands of the Enemy...remember from this perspective, God is the Enemy. Wormwood has an uncle, Screwtape, who advises the rookie Wormwood on how to keep the Spirit out of his human assignment. Again, it is fanciful, but what would it look like to keep the true Spirit of God out of someone’s life? Wormwood’s assignment joins the church...but Uncle Screwtape tells him not to worry. Churches are not really dangerous places for people to get the Spirit, according to Screwtape...as long as you can keep your assignment thinking about such questions as “What I like” and particularly about “What I dislike.” “What I dislike” is a sweet question that Wormwood can be successful in keeping the Enemy...in this case the Spirit of God...keeping the Enemy out.

How can we see the witness of the Spirit beyond our likes and dislikes? I always remember what Wade Huie, one of the preaching professors at Columbia Seminary when I was there, said about preaching. Now, mind you, Wade Huie has heard more bad sermons than all of us put together. Student sermons are just not very good...and there are not supposed to be...few people are “natural preachers” and I personally wonder about any craft that is just plain easy to do. Student sermons are not good...and Wade Huie would listen to them year after year. But one of Wade Huie’s mantras, one of his commitments, was that every sermon had some Word of God in it...no matter how poorly it was done. Every student sermon had a Word of God to him. Did he want his students to continue to be poor preachers? No, but he listened as one who was committed to seeking the Word of God...even in poor preaching.

The first and foremost witness to Jesus, the one known in water and blood according to our text today, is the very Spirit of God. The water and blood are witnesses...but without Spirit they have no power – no persuasiveness – no traction in our lives.

Our text today then suggests two other witnesses: “This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood.” How did Jesus come by water? He came through the waters of the river Jordan in baptism. And his followers continued the practice of baptism.

The history of baptism before Jesus is really unknown. What we do know is that Jesus was

baptized...and that his followers continued the practice. Baptism is a vital witness.

As we move ahead with our plans for an alternative way of worship with our Second Sunday at the Center, I am reminded that worship has always been changing...has always been in flux. The way the worshiped in the first century did not work in the second century...the way they worshiped in the second century did not work in the third century. The music changed, the language changed, the times changes. But what not been altered through all those centuries is this simple act of using water for baptism...and this gathering around a table for Communion.

Baptism is a central witness. Now sometimes I think we forget that. I have had the phone call that asked the question: "When can we get the baby done?"

And I say, "What?"

"You know, get the baby done...throw a little water on the head."

"Oh, you mean, baptism."

"Yeah, that's it."

"I think we need to talk."

Baptism...how sweet...how utterly radical. I recently wondered a bit about how many baptisms we would have if it included a free tattoo? Get your baptism here at Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church and we will throw in a free tattoo of the infan! Who knows...It might increase the rate of baptism in some quarters! I will readily confess that I am part of that generation that is not comfortable with tattoos—that's puts it mildly—but again, my tastes are not the governing factor for others, even my grown children. But what if baptism put a permanent mark on a person?

That's exactly the way that baptism is understood in the book of Revelation. Baptism is a mark that says, "You belong to Jesus." It is a permanent tattoo. The tattoo says: I am God's child. And the mark of the beast is a sort of anti-baptism: you belong to the world, to the evil empire, which the Roman Empire was beginning to come. Don't look for the mark of the beast with the number 666...look for the marks that say: "You don't belong to Jesus." The mark of the beast is simply all the ways we demonstrate that we do not know to whom we belong.

Baptism, for most of us, was not a choice we made. And perhaps we have some regrets that we did not get to make that choice for ourselves. But here what is shared in Jesus' baptism, in infant baptism, in believer baptism: You are accepted by God...you belong...you are marked permanently.

Can you get rid of the mark of baptism? Well, I suppose so, like asking if can you get rid of a tattoo. It is certainly possible...but baptism is a witness that before we chose God, God chose us. Remember at Jesus' baptism, the heavens opened and the voice of God said: "This is my beloved Son." Baptism is a witness that as 1 John puts elsewhere: we love because God first loved us. Baptism is all about acceptance.

Now, did you happen to catch the qualification in this text? Jesus came by water and

blood...not just water alone but water and blood. There seems to be hesitancy about the "blood." We keep coming back to blood...perhaps we thought we could get away from blood. Blood seems barbaric, primitive; but blood means life.

Yes, this Jesus knew the Spirit of God. Yes, this Jesus was baptized in water. But it comes down to blood. Even in the pre-scientific days of the Bible, there was the realization that blood means life. Lose blood—you can die. Stop blood from flowing—you die. We know, of course, that the gift of blood can keep someone alive following surgery...following an accident...following chemotherapy. Every blood drive we have, I see people who confront their fear of needles because they know that they are making a difference in someone else's life—often that pint of blood can help three different people.

The witness is in blood: real, tangible, costly. You may know that there have been a number of hymns, particularly gospel hymns that celebrate the blood of Jesus. I don't know that we ever sang many of the "blood hymns" in the Presbyterian Church, but I do remember the old red Hymnbook had the hymn: The fountain filled with blood that flows from Emanuel's veins.

Blood means life...not just a nod of the head but an embodiment of the witness. It is like the woman years ago asking a Seminole Indian in Florida about his necklace of alligator teeth. She admired the necklace and said, "I guess it sort of like wearing a string of pearls." "No," he disagreed respectfully, "most anyone can open an oyster." In other words, alligator teeth take a lot more commitment! Commitment...life...blood.

A few years back a story made the rounds among preachers that bears repeating here. It was about an eight-year old child being asked to give blood for his baby sister, who was extremely sick. The eight year's old blood was the perfect match to give her baby sister a chance for health. The eight-year old child was told: "We need your blood to save your sister." The young child agreed. As the technicians were prepping her for withdrawing the blood, she asked her mother to be sure say "good-bye" to her cat. The mother did not understand at first but then realized the child thought to give her blood meant to give her life. She had agreed to the transfusion, thinking that she was giving her life for her sister. What a relief to tell her that to give life was to gain life—life for her baby sister and life for her!

Blood means life. Jesus' ministry does not end with his baptism. It is not enough for the Spirit to descend upon him and for God to say: "This is my beloved Son." No, it takes life. And maybe the reason we do not want hear about the blood, the gruesomeness of blood, is that we know what that witness calls from us: Life calls for life.

Once again, we have stewardship text: stewardship is the church's shorthand that our faith is responsive—that it calls us to live and embody our faith. More than just saying, "I feel the Spirit"...more than just knowing "I am accepted" (that's the message of baptism). Faith means "blood." It means life...our life.

How do you measure life? We sometimes speak of someone's worth—their net worth! And we

mean dollars. We speak of what a person can do—their skills and talents. But these aren't the greatest measures our time. Some of you may recall the song by Harry Chapin, a song about the experience of father who had no time for his son. The chorus went something like this:

The cat's in the cradle and the silver spoon  
Little Boy Blue and the Man and the Moon.  
When you coming home, Dad [said the child]  
I don't know when, but we'll get together soon. [said the Dad]  
You know we'll have good time then.

The song, of course, is how the child grows up to be just like Dad...no time...no time for each other.

The witness of "blood" is life: God gives life...and the equivalent response is our life.

Back to Maya Angelou, the African-American poet. She draws a distinction between growing older and growing up. Growing older means this:

Most people just get older, and they find parking spaces, honor their credit cards, choose personal preferences in drink, have the nerve to get married and have children, and they call that growing up. That's not. That's getting older.<sup>1</sup>

Growing up—now that's different. That's knowing where to invest your life...where to put your life. And it is hard to grow up...to know how to lay our life down to find life...to lose ourselves in service...to lose ourselves in praise...to let go in awe. The witness of the blood: God gives nothing less than life...and asks, in return, for nothing less.

Can I get a witness? The Spirit says: God is here. The water says: You belong. The blood says: Life. Give your life...and you will find life.

---

<sup>1</sup> From an interview with David Frost, see <http://www.newsun.com/angelou.html>