

# Sermon for November 13, 2016 - "Testifying Together"

Twenty-sixth Sunday After Pentecost

November 13, 2016

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Decorah, Iowa

Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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## Testifying Together

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus. Amen.

In the story we just heard, Jesus tells the disciples, "do not be terrified." That is a message we also need to hear right now after a divisive and painful week in our country, as we hear reports of harassment and hate crimes, as people protest in the streets. We need to hear the most repeated phrase in scripture, "do not be afraid, do not be terrified." We also need to know why it is that we're told not to be afraid.

Sometimes people say "don't be afraid" as a way to minimize the problems we face - "it's not so bad, it'll be fine." Yet sometimes there are very real reasons to be afraid. Fear alerts us to the potential of danger for us and the community. If we ignore and minimize the fear, we may also ignore important information and not take the action needed for us all to be safe and well. Right now people of color, Muslims, refugees, immigrants, women, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people have very real reasons to be afraid due to the actions of supremacists who've been emboldened by hateful campaign rhetoric that they feel has now been endorsed.

Other times people say "don't be afraid" as a way to critique people from all across the political spectrum who have very real concerns about the state of our country and our world right now - as in "don't get all worked up about it, just relax already." Yet it's much easier to say "don't worry about it" from a position of safety and privilege. Both the Muslim woman suffering abuse and the unemployed factory worker have real concerns that we as a country need to hear and address. Still other times people say "don't be afraid, God's got this" as a way to excuse us from taking any action.

Notice, Jesus doesn't minimize the reasons the disciples have to be afraid. In fact, he tells them things are only going to get worse before the end of the world as we know it, before the dawn of God's new day in which all will live in peace. Jesus doesn't say, "relax, don't get worked up, God will fix this." Jesus doesn't deny or diminish the power of fear or encourage his disciples to avoid it. Fear is a powerful force that can lead to hatred and despair. We need to take it seriously and address it; Jesus encourages us to do just that. He tells his disciples to challenge the power of fear by testifying against it.

To testify means to be like witnesses in a courtroom, witnesses who make the case that God's love and God's mercy will prevail over fear. We make this case in the court of public opinion by how we speak and how we live. Our words and our lives provide evidence that love is stronger than all the reasons to fear. Living as witnesses to love allows us to bring a challenge to fear, hatred and despair. We challenge fear with courage, hatred with compassion, and despair with hope. We say to the fear within and around us, "it may look like you are all powerful but we know differently and we will show it with our lives and with our words."

This can feel like a daunting task especially when we're tired and confused. Yet Jesus promises we will receive what we need to testify, to challenge the power of fear. We will be given words and a wisdom. We need these gifts now more than ever. In a time of so many angry words, so many fearful words, we need words born out of wisdom and prayer, not quick, reactive words. We need words that bear witness to God's ways of love and mercy. So today we spend time in prayer and we listen for God's Word so that we will be shaped into witnesses of God's ways.

Jesus also promises that we will not perish, we will not be overcome by fear, we will be held safe in God. That is, we are in God's witness protection program. Even if we are put in prison, even if we die, even when we die, we are held always in God and given new life each day, new life that fear cannot destroy.

Finally, we are also given a community that helps us to testify. All of the instruction and the assurance in this passage is given to the community. Each 'you' in this passage is a plural 'you' - "This will give you all an opportunity to testify. I will give you all words and a wisdom. You all will be betrayed. By the endurance of all of you, you all will gain your souls." We aren't just individual witnesses; we are part of a class action lawsuit against the power of fear. We're in this together and we have a great cloud of witnesses with us as we make our case.

One in that great cloud of witnesses is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a leader in the confessing church when the Nazis ruled Germany. Bonhoeffer testified against the forces of fear and hatred that were so pervasive in Germany in his time. He was a witness to God's ways in his words and his life. Bonhoeffer's prayer and study of God's word ultimately led him to the awareness that he needed to challenge the power of fear by working to overthrow the Nazi regime. Bonhoeffer was imprisoned and ultimately killed by the Nazis. While he was in prison, Bonhoeffer wrote a number of letters. One of these letters was set to music to create the hymn we will sing as our Hymn of the Day. This hymn conveys Bonhoeffer's trust that his fear would not prevail, that he could face whatever came with confidence and hope while living as a witness to God.

May this hymn, *By Gracious Powers*, be our prayer; may it help us to receive words and wisdom so that, in the face of fear, we might be witnesses to God's ways of love and mercy.

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