

“The Mandate”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for May 13th 2018 (Ascension Sunday)
by Foster Freed

Acts 1: 1-11

The word that always comes to mind—at any rate, the word that always comes to **my** mind—when I contemplate the Ascension of Christ, is the word “bittersweet”. That’s the quality I unfailingly attach to the Ascension: bittersweet. After all, if we ponder Christ’s Ascension in context, it represents a second occasion over a span of a mere six weeks in which the disciples, in effect, had lost their Jesus. The first such occasion, of course, took place on what we now know as Good Friday: the day of his death, death on a cross. Three days later, much to their surprise and much to their joy, they were reunited with him on Easter Sunday. Forty days later, however...

....the chronology of the fortieth day is exclusively found in that brief reading from the first chapter of Acts to which we just listened...

....forty days after Easter, the first disciples, in a very real sense, were once again bidding farewell to their teacher and their Lord. Whatever comfort they no doubt derived from this far more glorious departure, and from the promise that he was now with God, it’s hard to shake the presumption that there would have been flashes of sadness for them as they awoke to the fact that their life together with Jesus was now being replaced by a life separated from him. Bittersweet... bittersweet is the word I always hit upon in connection with Christ’s Ascension. That having been said...

My hope, this morning, is that we will dwell neither on the bitter nor the sweet, as we instead contemplate Jesus’ final words to his disciples, just prior to his Ascension. The writer of the third Gospel, the Gospel according to Luke—who was also the author of the book Acts—Luke tells the story of the Ascension twice: once as the closing episode of the Gospel that bears his name, and then again as the opening episode to the Acts of the Apostles. And it’s in that second telling—the one to which we listened this morning—it’s here that Luke shares with his readers words from the risen and ascending Christ that can truly be regarded as Christ’s mandate for his first disciples and—by extension—Christ’s mandate for his church down through the ages.

Describing the events of that fortieth day, Luke writes: *So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”* Hear that final verse again! *You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth:* the key **phrase** in all of that being, *you will be*

my witnesses...the key **word** in all of that being the word *witness*. There...right there...is the core of the mandate Christ handed to his first followers...a core mandate which continues to be at the heart of what we call the Church. **You will be my witnesses.**

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Let's begin with a glimpse into the Greek background of the word translated here with the English word "witness" because, as Don Cherry might say: it's a beaut. The word in question is *martures...martures*...from which, as you may already have surmised, comes our English word: martyr. Now: it's important to acknowledge that the original Greek word has a far wider frame of reference than the English word "martyr". In the Greek of the New Testament, it refers to **any** person who bears witness, not only those who pay for their witness with their life. Nevertheless: we should not be too quick to dismiss that connection as mere word-play, because it is much more than that. In truth: if you have ever been called upon to appear as a witness in a courtroom proceeding—or in some other setting in which you have sworn an oath to tell the whole truth as you know it—if you have ever experienced such a moment, you will have experienced something of the weightiness of serving as a witness. It's no laughing matter and, in a very real sense, it can be said that anyone who takes seriously their commitment to offer truthful witness, puts their own life on the line when doing so.

Nor is the courtroom analogy out of place when we ponder the mandate Christ offers his gathered disciples on their fortieth—and final day—together in the aftermath of Easter. Indeed: if we want to locate the most important Old Testament precedent for this morning's text, we need to head straight to the 43rd chapter of the prophet Isaiah, where the God of Israel summons the nations to what appears to be an impromptu court-room, so that they might testify—so that they might bear witness—on behalf of their so-called gods.¹

*All the nations gather together,
and the peoples assemble.
Who among them can declare this,
and show us the former things?
Let them bring their witnesses to prove them right,
and let them hear and say, It is true.*

Then, having summoned the nations...and presumably having heard nothing from them by way of convincing testimony...God then turns to His people Israel and says:

*"You are my witnesses," declares the Lord,
"and my servant whom I have chosen,
that you may know and believe me
and understand that I am he.
Before me no god was formed,
nor shall there be any after me.*

*I, I am the Lord,
and besides me there is no savior.
I declared and saved and proclaimed,
when there was no strange god among you;
and you are my witnesses,” declares the Lord, “and I am God.*

And yes: in the first Chapter of Acts...as in so many parts of the New Testament if only we have eyes with which to see and ears with which to hear: in Acts chapter 1, it is none other than the Lord Jesus implicitly taking those bold claims upon himself. Just as the people Israel was—and still is—called to bear its distinct witness to the God who called them out from bondage, so now the Church is called to bear its distinct witness to the One who came in the name of the Lord. We have a name for that one. We call him Jesus.

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Suffice it to say...suffice it to say that the mandate...the **core** mandate offered to those first followers of Christ...

*“...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria,
and to the end of the earth...”*

...suffice it to say that core mandate poses some very specific challenges to those of us who participate in the life of what are still regarded as the “mainline Protestant Churches” although, as some wags prefer, better regarded as the “old-line—or even the sidelined—Protestant Churches”. That Christianity, as a whole, is far from a growing enterprise in most of Europe and in much of North America will come as no surprise; that the mainline Protestant Churches are especially struggling is a well known fact. And it seems to me that most of the challenges we face in Churches such as the United Church of Canada, stem from the fact that we are Churches whose identity was shaped by the reality of Christendom: which is to say, the reality of a society and of a culture in which Christian identity was pretty much taken for granted. Every facet of society in a nation such as Canada—including our educational institutions—were unambiguously shaped by the assumption that our culture was a Christian culture, and needed neither to apologize for that fact, or to disguise that fact. Oh yes: an awareness that there were Jewish minorities in many Canadian communities might be factored in by way of courtesy. More importantly, the Catholic-Protestant divide might well need to be accommodated: an accommodation which continues to be reflected in some Provinces, especially Ontario, with its separate school boards for the religious minority in a given community. And yet, ironically: even the ongoing existence of those separate school boards, reflects a history in which it was simply taken for granted that you were either Protestant or Catholic, and that religious training of some sort would be an inevitable part of the education provided young Canadians, and not merely within the walls of the churches their families attended, but as part of the public education that would be provided for them.

I hasten to add: I do not stand before you this morning to bemoan the fact that much of that has dramatically changed over the course of our life-times. Nor, for that matter, do I have any need to demonize Christendom which—much like any other social/cultural context—had its notable strengths as well as its weaknesses and abuses. But the simple fact is that, at least for now: all of that is behind us. The situation the Church now faces is one in which it can no longer take for granted a context in which the Gospel is the common property of everyone and anyone: despite the fact that many people who actually know nothing about Christianity in places such as Canada, regard themselves as knowing everything they need to know. Not easy bearing witness in that sort of context: and yes, it is a context that impacts **all** Churches. Nevertheless.

Nevertheless: I will maintain that these profound cultural changes impact mainline Protestant churches more sharply than they impact other churches. In part, that's because—as Churches that came of age under Christendom—we are unavoidably connected to some of the aspects of Christendom now viewed in a harshly negative way: such things as colonialism abroad, and residential school right here at home. This is not the time to debate the legacy of our colonial/residential school past, simply to note that we are now paying a severe price for our association with those facets of the history of the Christian West. But there's more: and here, I think, is where the real heart of our present challenge needs to be located.

For most of the history of mainline Protestantism—certainly for **the entirety** of the less than 100 year history of the United Church of Canada—our intention, as a Church formed in the context of Christendom, had less to do with sharing the Gospel...

...less to do with the ABC's of bearing witness to Christ...

...and far more to do with shaping a people whose life-of-discipleship had the integrity of those who not only talk-the-talk but were willing and able to walk-the-walk. And that friends, is not a heritage at which we should be taking cheap shots; those of our forebears who were formed by the Gospel of Jesus Christ rightly yearned...

...**rightly** yearned!...

...to form a people whom God need not be embarrassed to call His own.

I love the way the late great American Lutheran theologian Robert Jenson put the matter.

It was perhaps the real substance of Protestantism that it demanded that all believers live with the attention to justice and charity which had for centuries been demanded only of those under special vows. We must maintain [that] insight. The church must indeed pursue God's action in the world.ⁱⁱ

Amen to that! What Jenson then goes on to say, however, is that the situation in which we now find ourselves—a situation in which the Gospel can no longer be regarded as the common property of culture and society at large—forces us to rethink our essential identity. And yes: in my humble opinion that means returning to our core mandate, returning to Christ’s initial charge to those he called friends: *you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*

Witnesses! You will be my witnesses! Thus saith the Lord! Thus saith the risen and ascended Christ!

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I am reminded...reminded of that little ditty to which we United Church types often gravitate: the one generally attributed to St. Francis, the one that goes: “Preach the Gospel...and if necessary, use words.” Well: like it or not, ours is a time when it most certainly will be necessary for us to use words, if we wish to be a people capable of telling the story of Jesus: bearing witness to the story of Jesus and through that story, bearing witness to the astonishing love of the God who creates and sustains, reconciles and makes new, the God who has promised not to rest until all creation has been restored to the light, life and love which is its birthright. That’s an astonishing story—in some ways an impossibly wonderful story—and unless we know that story well, unless we have it in our bones, we will never be able to serve as witnesses to that story, witnesses to the love that gave that story birth.

Nor should any of that be taken as “Foster’s five-plank programme for church renewal and growth”. God forbid! I am long past the stage in my pilgrimage at which I might have been tempted to pass on to you, the latest snake-oil formula for congregational or denominational revival. I’m quite content to leave such revival in the hands of the Spirit of the Good God: a Spirit whose coming we’ll get to celebrate next Sunday. No! None of what I am saying here should be embraced—nor should it be rejected—because it is guaranteed to succeed or bound to fail at attracting new members and growing our flock. We all want to see that happen...but ultimately that will be in God’s hands.

No! This is not about church growth. This is about simple faithfulness: simple faithfulness to the core mandate Christ left with his first disciples...a core mandate that has been passed down to us through the millennia. *You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.* **You will be my witnesses.** Our core mandate: one that will never get old...one that will never be stale.

May it be so! In Jesus’ name. Amen!!

ⁱ Isaiah 43: 9-12

ⁱⁱ “How the World Lost Its Story”, *First Things*, [October 1993],
<https://www.firstthings.com/article/1993/10/how-the-world-lost-its-story>