

## Persistent Witness

sermon digest

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Acts 28:16-31

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The story of the church began with the Twelve at the Temple in Jerusalem and a focus on Peter; it ends in Rome with Paul's mission to the Gentiles. According to tradition, Paul's imprisonment in Rome was the final act of his life. During the persecutions under Nero in the mid-sixties, Peter was said to have been crucified upside down; and Paul, because of his Roman citizenship, was afforded the more humane execution of beheading. So, Acts begins and ends as a witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. At the beginning, the church was energized by the commission, "you will be my witnesses" (1:8). The story ends with the witness of Paul to the Gentiles under house arrest in Rome.

The Greek word in the commissioning of the church was martyr (*martyres*). It was originally a legal term referring to testimony given in court where one is called to give a truthful report of what has been seen and heard. The Jewish commandment prohibits falsehood in the court of law where one is called to give testimony concerning actual events. On the negative side of the issue, bearing false witness, fabricating a falsehood, when someone's life or property are hanging in the balance is bad. With passing events, the word for witness took on new meaning. Stephen died bearing witness to the events surrounding the life and death of Jesus (Acts 7). Luke's choice of words is interesting. The "witnesses" who laid their coats at the feet of Saul while Stephen is stoned to death are called *martyres*. They are not suffering for the faith or giving their lives for a cause; they are just observers of an act of injustice attributed to the persecution of Christians and Saul/Paul is also a witness, *martyres*. They may be able to give accurate testimony concerning the act of Stephen's death, but their disregard for justice in the cause of his death is an example of the "false witness" implied in the Law.

You can't miss the irony. Saul/Paul, witness to the death of Stephen, comes to the end of his road in Rome, like Stephen, giving witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. So the meaning of martyr is changed by events to mean one who dies for the truth.

**Will the real martyrs please stand up?** I recall a statement about language by seminary professor and Bible scholar Bill Hull: "Words have uses rather than meanings." The comment has stuck in my mind for decades as I have seen new words come into being by introduction of new technology or social change and as I have seen old words take on new meanings as they are affected by historical events. No word has been more volatile in history than the word *martyr*. The martyrs of the early church were people persecuted for bearing witness to gospel of Christ. The original Christian witnesses were those who had known the historical Jesus and were witnesses to his death and resurrection. Even in the New Testament there is a political dimension, as the first martyrs died at the hands of the Jewish establishment led by radicals like Saul. Later the word applied solely to people who refused to submit to the demand of Rome to burn incense in respect for Caesar. They died bearing witness to the Jewish root of their faith, "You shall have no other gods before me." In the years between Acts and the rise of Constantine the Great in the early fourth century, being a martyr came to mean refusing to submit to the demand of Rome to deny their faith in Christ. Martyrdom became the one sure way to salvation. Whereas the final hope for life after death had been a matter to be settled in the Judgment of God, the persecution of the church led to a theological innovation. The church assured the faithful that salvation was absolute and certain for those who died as witnesses, the martyrs.

A change in history brought about a change in the meaning of terms. The Jews who were the original persecutors of Christian martyrs became targets of persecution for the Church under the Constantinian establishment.

The Anabaptists emerged with the Protestant Reformation as followers of Christ who believed in radical obedience. The principal Anabaptists were pacifists who refused to defend themselves against their enemies. Their history is red with the blood of saints. But now Christians were persecuting Christians. Subsequent generations of Mennonites were raised in homes where *Martyrs Mirror*, stories of the persecution of their forebears, sat alongside the Bible at the foundation of their faith. The book includes the story of Dirk Willems, captured by the Spanish Inquisition in Holland, who escaped jail and took flight across Holland. He safely crossed a frozen pond. When the man giving

chase broke through the ice and was about to drown, Dirk returned to save his life at the cost of his own.

The word keeps changing. I grew up in an evangelical tradition where witness was more of a verb than a noun. Being a faithful witness meant convincing others of the truth of the gospel. However, in actual practice witnessing often meant getting someone to say, “uncle” in yielding to your version of the gospel and your denominational division of the church. In *The Taste of New Wine* Keith Miller calls this kind of witness (remember the original word was *martyres*), “legalistic, verbal religious ‘scalp gathering.’” Unfortunately, what we called “soul-winning” was usually more about winning than it was our concern for souls.

Following the Colorado Columbine High School shooting in 1999 stories began to emerge about the behaviors of the students in the face of death. One of those stories was about Cassie Bernall, who had hidden under a table to escape the killers. According to the story that circulated following the shooting, one of the angry young men with guns found her under the table, pointed the gun at her head and asked, “Do you believe in God?” When she said, “yes,” he ended her life. A report in *Christian Century* (July 29, 2008), “How Martyrs are Made,” notes that the story spread quickly through churches and the media. T-shirts appears with the words, “She said Yes.” Bernall was lauded as a modern martyr. Then, some of the witnesses began to dispute the accuracy of the story. In *Martyrdom and Memory* Elizabeth Castelli noted that many of folks who had promoted the idea of martyrdom began to say that the truth of the story was unimportant. She found irony in the this loose attitude toward truth for folks who insisted on the literal reading of the Bible.

Our Catholic friends commemorate martyrs of history as a regular part of their lectionary readings. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Oscar Romero, and Martin Luther King, Jr., have been praised as political as well as Christian martyrs as they confronted political and social atrocities with a witness to the universal love of God. Soldiers who die in service to their country are praised as martyrs to their patriotism.

Now we are facing a new, less heroic, implication in the word martyr as it is splashed across the headlines of newspapers. While the traditional meanings that flow out of Christian history continue to be valid, we are more likely to associate martyrs today with suicide bombers and religious radicals. Christianity is not the only religion in the world and certainly not the only religion with a history of people who have suffered for their faith.

An Islamic scholar from Tehran University has written that the meaning of martyrdom is badly misunderstood by radicals in his own faith. Like the word *Jihad*, generally applied to holy war against political enemies, *shahada*, the Arabic word for martyr has been distorted in popular nomenclature. Islamic *Jihad* is the war within and *shahada* is about suffering for righteousness. Neither are about dying to kill one’s political enemies.

***The end is the beginning.*** There is little doubt that Paul died well before Luke wrote Acts. His death was probably known throughout the church. If we are to believe tradition, Paul died at the hands of an insane tyrant Nero; and he died bearing witness to his faith. But Luke has every intention of leaving the door wide open. I suspect that Luke is intentional about leaving off an account of Paul’s death because his martyrdom is less important than the kingdom of God that he proclaimed.

The final word of Paul to the Jews of Rome is an installment in the calling of Christ, not a conclusion. So, the Acts story is bigger than Acts, larger than one book of our New Testament, actually bigger than the Bible. Paul, who had experienced the miraculous rescue in Philippi, is left under house arrest in Rome eventually to die at the hands of the very Gentiles he was trying to save. Like most of the messages in Acts, Paul’s final witness receives mixed reviews: “Some were convinced by what he had said, while others refused to believe.” Yet, the point in Luke’s story is that the church keeps on going; the gospel continues to spread throughout the world.

The driving power behind the church movement is the Spirit of God, Creator and Lord of the cosmos. Paul dwelled in Rome for two years under house arrest, but not on vacation. He continued to proclaim the gospel of Christ “with all boldness and without hindrance.” The story of the mustard seed beginning of the gospel in Jerusalem was spreading to the entire civilized world. The movement continued in spite of numerous obstacles and a multitude of failures. Luke looks to the future of a

persistent witness to the God who will not cease until finished with the new creation.