

February 21, 2010 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent  
Deut. 26:1-11

*The Stewardship of Prayer and  
Witness 3: Telling Your Story*

You have promised to be a witness. That is one of the vows we make as United Methodists:

*As members of this congregation,  
will you faithfully participate in its ministries by  
your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service, and your witness?*

*United Methodist Hymnal, 38*

Now I know that the General Conference of our church did not add the promise of “witness” until its last meeting in 2008, but shall we say we are all “grandfathered” into this promise? When the church asks you to personally commit yourself to the stewardship of witness, what do you imagine your church is asking you to do? When you think of “witnessing,” perhaps one of the following approaches comes to mind:

#### SCENE 1

A: Do you know that God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life?

B: If you’re like me, you’re probably concerned about what’s going on in the world right now. Did you know that the Bible predicted many of the things that are happening right now?

C: If you were to die tonight and St. Peter met you at heaven’s gate and asked you, “Why should I let you in?,” what would you say to him?

D: Are you saved?

E: Brother, do you know Jesus? Well, if you don’t then you’re not saved. And if you’re not saved, then you won’t escape eternal fire!

*Faith-Sharing Video Leader’s Guide* by Shirley Clement (Discipleship Resources, 2003), p. 17.

To witness is to somehow relate to somebody else the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. A “witness” is one who has seen and known good news first hand and shares that good news with others. The problem is the idea of witnessing does not often conjure up very positive images in our minds these days. At the very least, unfortunately, witnessing seems to make us United Methodists uncomfortable. It didn’t use to be that way. As a matter of fact,

when John Wesley, a priest of the Church of England who was a Lincoln Fellow at Oxford, first started preaching in that field in Bristol, England on April 2, 1739 the movement he started became the greatest evangelical awakening that spread through England and the New World that was sustained for more than 50 years. The very roots of our United Methodist tradition are planted in the bedrock of evangelism and witness. By definition, by tradition, and by calling, then, if you are United Methodist, you are an evangelist, a witness. You are one who has experienced the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and share that good news with others. As a matter of fact, according to the intention and directive of John Wesley himself, you are one of his folk who are sent “to reform the nation, especially the Church, and to spread scriptural holiness over the land.”

John Wesley, 1744

Now, if you were just a bit uncomfortable at the mere mention of the word “evangelism,” if you are having any trouble at all imagining yourself witnessing, then the revelation that if you are United Methodist then you are an evangelist must really have you squirming in your seat! And I know that most of us Warwick Memorial Church folk, perhaps much like other United Methodists today, simply do not understand ourselves as evangelists. We all struggle with “witnessing,” what it means to be a witness.

Witnessing is telling your story. That’s what God patiently taught the ancient Hebrews in the passage from the book of Deuteronomy today. God instructed the people when they finally arrive at the promised land to gather together in worship and

*you shall make this response before the LORD your God: ‘A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD hear our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into*

*this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me.'*

Deuteronomy 26:5-9

Whenever the people of God gather together we celebrate the story. When people celebrate the story, that story becomes "our" story; it becomes "my" story." It is a story that is uniquely yours yet has its beginning in community.

It is a story that locates you and your life in a culture that nurtures a spirit of giving and generosity.

It is a story that dislocates you from the culture all around us that so often succeeds in nurturing in you a spirit of getting, accumulating, and acquiring.

It is a story that gives you hope precisely because it assures you that the poor, those who mourn, those who weep inherit the kingdom of God.

It is a story that turns a culture that values wealth, status, and power upside down.

It is a story of a God who became a human being, suffered, died, and rose from the dead that the life given to you at creation is given back to you again; the gift of a loving and merciful God.

It is a story that nurtures in you the love of God and neighbor.

How did you first come to know this story? What was your first encounter with the community of this story? Under what circumstances were you first introduced to the church? A recent survey of church members reveals the following:

5 % walked in (visited the church on their own);

6 % were attracted to the minister;

3 % came because of the programs;

1 % were invited through visitation efforts;

5 % came through the Sunday School;

*80% by the influence of friends, neighbors, and relatives.*

How do most people first hear the Word of God? By what means do most folks first hear the story? How have most of us been introduced to the church? Friends, relatives, acquaintances, and neighbors.

In this season of Lent your church invites you to a practice of spiritual discipline. You received this wallet size card in the mail this week:



As a part of your spiritual discipline in this season of Lent ask God to lead you to identify a friend, a relative, an acquaintance, a neighbor who is not now active in a church—the “F.R.A.N. Plan.” You’ll notice the “FRAN Plan” describes one who is not now active in a church as “six months.” Pray for these folks. Ask God to guide you in your relationship with them. It is the hope of your church that as you remember them, pray for them, and seek God’s guidance in your relationship with them that your mutual relationship will grow in trust, your faith story will find a voice, that their response to your invitation to come to church with you will be warmly received.

When you think of “witnessing,” what is the first image that comes to your mind? When the church asks you to promise to witness, perhaps a scene such as this can come to your mind:

## SCENE 2

*Two adult women sitting in rocking chairs, one wrapped in a shawl (#2)*

1: Sure is a nice day.

2: Kinda cold in here if you ask me!

1: Oh, that’s just like you, Gladys, always looking on the bright side!

2: (wrapping her shawl around her more tightly), Well, it is cold; I don’t care what you say!

1: (pause) Did you like the dessert today?

2: You mean that mess they called “apple cobbler?” Sure wasn’t like what I use to make.

1: (pause) (looks at 2) Are you OK?

2: Yes, I’m perfectly fine! (muffled cough)

1: (pause) OK, good! And I’m glad you sound so good too!

2: (muffled cough again) Yes, thank you.

1: (pause) So...uh...what did the doctor say?

2: (Glares at 1) How did you know I saw the doctor?

1: Well, Gladys everybody has been so concerned about you!

2: Just a bunch of nosy people around here if you ask me! A person can’t ever have any privacy at all.

- 1: Now Gladys, you know we all love you.  
 2: I just want to be left alone.  
 1: No you don't and you know it!  
 2: (pause) Well.....it's just hard.  
 1: I know, dear, (placing her hand on top of hers), I know.  
 2: I've been thinking.....how did you ever get through it?  
 1: Well, if I didn't have the good Lord with me I don't think I would have ever made it.  
 2: Well, not everybody can have strong faith like you (withdraws her hand).  
 1: But anybody can have friends who really care, praying and helping as best they can.  
 2: You mean all those visitors who came to see you?  
 1: Yes, my church friends. I couldn't have done without them. (pause) Gladys, would you like me to ask them to pray for you?  
 2: I suppose so. I need all the help I can get right now.  
 1: As a matter of fact, there is someone at church who makes the best apple cobbler I have ever tasted. She is such a dear. She'd be glad to bring some by for you one day.  
 2: Well, maybe.....(pause; both rocking and looking out) Which church do you go to again?  
 1: (smiles)

*A Christian Witness* by William G. Davidson

Someone has said, "What is Christianity but one beggar trying to tell another where to find food?" What is witnessing? For United Methodists, witnessing is really just the natural result of our relationships of love nurtured by the love of God we have come to know and experience in the community of faith. If it may not seem to come quite so naturally to you, well, God can grow in you every bit of skill for witnessing that God has ever intended for you. As a matter of fact, I wonder if you have actually already been a much better witness than you imagined in your relationships with a friend, a relative, an acquaintance, or a neighbor? God's grace is like that, you know. God takes every bit of our love and, sometimes quite unbeknownst to us, touches the heart of another. If that is true, how much more can God use us if we really give ourselves to intentionally praying for and inviting somebody else? Can you imagine what would happen if we really did promise to witness? Who knows? Maybe we could even "reform the nation, especially the Church, and...spread scriptural holiness over the land"!

William G. Davidson