

**Can I Get a Witness?
Sunday, April 23, 2023, 10:00 a.m.
All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Mike Kinman**

I think it was about five years ago. I was invited to a gathering of clergy from around the country to ask us about the future of a church institution.

The last morning of this gathering there were about 20 of us sitting in a circle in this living room of this retreat center and they asked us to answer a question: What do you think is the biggest issue facing the church in the next 25 years.

My friend Daniel was one of the first to answer ... and he didn't hesitate.

It's climate change, he said. If we keep going the way we are going, millions of people are going to die in the decades to come.

And everyone around the circle nodded their head.

And then the next person shared, and then the next, and then the next and then a few minutes later it came to me.

And I said, "A few minutes ago, Daniel said because of climate change if we keep going the way we are going, millions of people are going to die." And not only did none of us disagree, we all nodded our heads. And then we went on talking about other things.

And then I said, "If we all agree that millions of people are going to die because of climate change if we don't change the direction we are going ... how come this isn't the only thing we are talking about?"

I don't remember how the conversation went but I remember it didn't last very long.

I remember the conversation turned very quickly toward feelings of resignation and helplessness.

And I remember when the notes came out from the meeting there was really nothing about climate change in there.

And it's not like I came back here to All Saints and made fighting climate change the center of my life, either ... so I'm definitely not pointing any fingers here.

But the whole thing has stuck with me ever since. It's not like we don't recognize the threat of climate change. Yale did a survey last year and found that 72% of Americans believe climate change is happening,

65% are worried about it,
71% believe it will harm future generations
and close to half believe it will affect them personally.

Yet only 34% percent of people discuss climate change even occasionally. So, it's not just about climate change deniers. Basically, half of us who are actively worried about climate change rarely or never discuss it.

Now, we could shame ourselves about that myself included ... and like pretty much all instances of shaming it wouldn't really accomplish much. Shame is not a great motivator.

Instead, I'd rather think about why. Because it's not just about climate change. It's about how we deal with a whole range of things that we basically agree are awful, yet we can't seem to get any traction on. Reducing gun violence springs to mind.

It's about feeling.

As Dr. Lucy Jones said in the Forum, "People would rather feel safe than be safe."

And there is data on this!

I've talked before about Ron Heifetz' work at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. About 25 years ago, Heifetz did extensive research on what he called "real work values" –the things that motivate us in everything we do. He found three – all related – that seem to cross every demographic area.

- *Maximize winning/minimize losing
- *Appear competent.
- *Feel strong ... and we don't feel strong when we feel unsafe.

This is our first clue to why we can be worried about climate change and still do nothing about it. Because even if we agree about it – and even if we agree what needs to be done to address it -- it is incredibly challenging both because of the size of the problem – which is global – and how intractably enmeshed the global economic system is with all the drivers of climate change that need to be reversed.

And because the conventional wisdom that production and short-term economic growth are the greatest goods – going up against that so-called wisdom is the quickest way to lose, appear incompetent and feel weak as hell.

In many ways, it's easier to wring our hands in despair than actually try to do something because actually trying to do something feels like King Canute shouting at the tide to stop coming in.

One of the most prescient writers about climate change is Pasadena's own Octavia Butler. In *The Parable of the Sower*, which depicts a world where climate change has caused millions of refugees to flood over the border ... and Americans to try to head north to Canada ... Butler's hero, Lauren, is arguing with her father about things like climate change and he says:

"These things frighten people. It's best not to talk about them."

"But Dad," she responds, "that's like ... like ignoring a fire in the living room because we're all in the kitchen, and besides, house fires are too scary to talk about."

And we can be so afraid even to talk about the fire in the living room that we will follow anyone who will either tell us it isn't real or that someone else or something else that we can blame or hate on or legislate against is the real problem.

Butler goes on to write:

"When apparent stability disintegrates,
As it must--
God is Change--
People tend to give in
To fear and depression,
To need and greed.
When no influence is strong enough
To unify people
They divide.
They struggle,
One against one,
Group against group,
For survival, position, power.
They remember old hates and generate new ones,
They create chaos and nurture it.
They kill and kill and kill,
Until they are exhausted and destroyed,
Until they are conquered by outside forces,
Or until one of them becomes
A leader
Most will follow,
Or a tyrant
Most fear."

Sound familiar?

And it's nothing new.

In this morning's reading from Acts, the first followers of Jesus are facing their own intractable issue ... the seemingly endless oppression by the Roman Empire. Talk about something that makes them feel like weak, incompetent, losers! Every time they raise up any kind of opposition to Rome, they get swatted away like a gnat.

But now, they have among them the risen Christ. One who has survived the worst that Rome has to offer. A seemingly invincible soldier to march against the Emperor.

And so, they ask Jesus, "Rabbi, is this the time when you will restore sovereignty to Israel?" Basically, will you wave your hand and make all of this terrible stuff go away and make everything right again?

But Jesus says something curious.

He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Creator has set through divine authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

It's not like Jesus is telling them they are going to be incompetent, weak, losers. He is saying that they will have power ...but their power is not to overthrow. Their power is not to solve all the world's problems and make Israel great again.

You will receive power when Holy Breath comes upon you, Jesus says, and you will be my witnesses.

Witnesses.

That's what we are called to. Not conquerors or fixers or solvers or mounters of huge global campaigns.

Witnesses.

The Greek word for witness is *martus*. It's a word that was used in a courtroom setting of someone who testifies to the truth they know from personal experience. Someone who stakes their word and even their life on that truth ... that's why we are most familiar with *martus* from the word that comes from it ... martyr.

Now this wasn't for the disciples and it isn't for us a call to go out and indiscriminately fall on a sword. It was a call to go out and – despite their fear – speak the truth that they knew ... and to align their lives with that truth ... talk the talk and walk the walk ... even if that truth was inconvenient or put them in danger.

Jesus didn't ask them, and Jesus doesn't ask us to change the world. Jesus does ask us, just as he did those disciples in Acts, to be witnesses.

Not to change the world. Not to change anyone else's mind. But to speak the truth we know and to fashion *our* lives in accordance with it.

And to try to trust.

To try to trust that God will use the power of our witness.

That God will use the power of our courage, our courage to risk losing, to risk being seen as incompetent, to risk feeling weak ... that God will use the power of our witness to create more witnesses and more and more and more.

We don't have to change the world. Just our little corner of it.

Someone once asked Octavia Butler at a book signing

"Do you really believe that in the future we're going to have the kind of trouble you write about in your books?"

"I didn't make up the problems," she said. 'All I did was look around at the problems we're neglecting now and give them about 30 years to grow into full-fledged disasters.'

"Okay," the young man challenged. "So what's the answer?"

"There isn't one," she told him.

"No answer? You mean we're just doomed?"

"No," she said. "I mean there's no single answer that will solve all of our future problems. There's no magic bullet. Instead, there are thousands of answers—at least. You can be one of them if you choose to be."

That's the power of witness.

And we don't even have to do it alone. We get to do it together.

That's what it means to be the church. This is the community we go to not be alone in our witness. We get to strengthen each other with the power of our witness.

We get to hold onto each other as we speak the truth with our voices shaking.

A month ago, four of our youth stood right here and did just what Jesus is talking about.

They witnessed.

Maya Proulx witnessed not only to the problems of climate change but rightly put the responsibility squarely on our shoulders for our failure to think long-term.

And, amazingly, these phenomenal young people who have every reason to despair at the world they are being handed ... refused to give up hope.

"If we can just refocus the energy we took to put a man on the moon, we can do anything," Maya said, imploring us. "We just need your help."

Then standing in front of us, Maya, Connel Powers, Eliza LeMoine and Lola Piñon said:

"You are our voice right now.

"We as a generation are begging you to listen to us.

"Please, please listen before it's too late."

And we all stood and applauded.

And then I don't know about you, but I went back to my normal life.

It was like being back in that circle. We all agreed with everything they had to say. We not only nodded, we gave them a standing ovation.

And now it's time for us to act.

It's going to look different for each one of us.

But what will look the same is us holding hands and speaking the truth with the conviction of our hearts. Being that witness to our families, our friends, our colleagues and in the voting booth.

Witnessing to the need to reverse climate change AND witnessing to the need to prepare to help those who even now are suffering from its effects.

Witnessing to our individual and our church's need and opportunity to care for the hundreds of thousands and even millions of climate refugees that are already making their way north into southern California.

Witnessing to our individual and our church's need and opportunity to provide food and shelter and just as important the welcome of a loving community to those who even now are being displaced by climate change's impact.

Yes, it is our job, and make no mistake it is also our joy.

We are witnesses. And it's time to testify.

So today, before you leave this church campus, I want you to find one person ... and I want you to make an appointment to see them sometime in the next two weeks ... and I'll make it simple for some of you that it can even be someone you are living with right now. And when you meet you are going to share with each other one thing you are going to do as your witness to your belief that we need to act now to reverse climate change and care for those who are already suffering in its wake.

And if you are joining us online, find someone – anyone whom you can have this conversation with.

Anyone want to be my person?

And I'll even give you some seed for the conversation.

In our Forum, Dr. Lucy Jones reminded us that this is not about giving things up. The only solution is technological. We have to change our energy production.

So here are three things we can do:

- 1) Vote. And have responsiveness to climate change be a game-changing voting issue. People who will help us make the technological shifts we need to make get our vote and those who won't get voted out.
- 2) The next time you buy an appliance or car – don't throw out what you have now, but the next time you buy one – buy one that is Zero Carbon. If we all did that, we would meet our emissions goals.

I know! Wild, right? And that's not me saying it ... that's Dr. Lucy!

- 3) Talk about it. Talk about it to your friends, your colleagues, your neighbors. Talk about the joy of doing this. Talk about how great it feels to do something that not only helps the planet but that also probably will save you money on your utility bills. Talk about it and keep talking about it. Witness!

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you” says Jesus, “and you will be my witnesses.”

We have our charge.

Court is in session and our youth have called us to the stand.

It's time to testify.

Alleluia. Amen.