

“Witnesses, Not Spectators”

“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

Most people who meet me for the first time assume that I must be good at sports, especially basketball; after all, why wouldn't someone as tall as me be a natural at the game? But as I will often respond, I am living proof that height and talent don't necessarily go together, because I am a terrible athlete; in fact, I can't name single sport at which I have even a shred of ability. It's not due to lack of effort; for years, I tried to gain proficiency at a number of sports, especially basketball. I would work hard in gym class, shoot baskets in our neighbour's driveway, and even join a summer basketball league. When it became obvious that I wasn't good at sports that involved a ball (baseball, football, basketball, even bowling), I tried track and field, assuming that my long legs might give me an advantage. But while I did win a few races, I got hurt so often that I spent more time in the nurse's office than I did on the track. Finally, one day the coach took me aside, put his arm around my shoulder, and gave me a piece of advice that brought an end to my athletic career: *“You know, Jeff, the team needs spectators, too.”* At first, of course, I was devastated; but soon, I took my place in the stands and discovered that he was correct. I grew to love watching sports as a spectator, and attended many of my high school's football and basketball games. No longer needing to attend practices, I refocused my energies on music, and became drum major of our high school's marching band and first-chair clarinet in the school's concert band. When I entered university, I also attended many games, even though our teams were generally terrible. My interest in professional sports grew, so that I followed my favourite teams and was even able to attend a few games at various arenas and stadiums. While in high school I would have preferred to have had some talent that allowed me to get on the court, being a spectator was a role I was born to play, and I still support my teams by cheering them on from the sidelines.

While only a few people have the skills and talents to be on the field, the court, or the stage, all of us have the ability to be present as spectators. Being in the stands or in the theatre is an important role, because both athletes and actors perform better when there is a supportive crowd or audience cheering them on. Some teams honour their supporters with fan appreciation days, and teams such as the Seattle Seahawks go as far as to name their fans the “12th Man,” as if they are as critical to the team's success as the 11 men on the field in NFL football. Playing to a full house or a sold-out stadium of supporters can do much for the morale and confidence of those who are sharing their talents in the public arena.

But while being a supportive spectator is an important role, it is not always appropriate to every situation. When I preside at a marriage service, I often inform the invited guests that their role in that celebration is not as spectators, persons who have come to view the joining together of two persons in holy matrimony from the sidelines, but to be supportive witnesses of their marital union; our marriage service in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* includes a question to the congregation: *“Will all of you, by God's grace, uphold and care for John and Mary in their life together?”* In responding *“we will,”* each person present that day promises that they will continue to love and support this couple in their life together; being a witness is an active role, not a passive activity that one merely views from the seats of a church. Likewise, a celebration of Holy Baptism is not a spectator sport for those who gather to witness this sacrament; as the parents and godparents promise to raise their newly-baptized child in our Christian faith, so also does the congregation *“promise to support [this child] and pray for them in their new life in Christ.”* Each of us is challenged to actively participate in supporting the baptized child and their family as they seek to be faithful to the promises they make this day in sharing with the one who is reborn a child of God the good news of God's love for all God's children. While our place in worship may resemble the positions of spectators that we occupy in other venues, there are no spectators in worship; all of us are called to listen to what is being spoken to us, and each of us is called to actively respond by getting

involved in the arena of God's love, which is God's mission for the world into which God calls each of God's disciples.

As we hear the words of today's Gospel lesson from John, we may feel that we are once again playing the role of spectators, overhearing what our Risen Lord says to his disciples the first times he appears among them following his Resurrection. The scene opens *"when it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'"* (20:19). It must be noted that the disciples' "fear of the Jews" was not a general attitude toward the Jewish people, since the disciples were all Jews themselves; it was a fear of the authorities who had participated in Jesus' condemnation and crucifixion, and fear that they would soon meet the same fate. Jesus' first words to these fear-filled disciples is "peace be with you," which in one sense was a conventional greeting used whenever one entered a home or corresponded with friends (*"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."* – 1 Corinthians 1:3), but here Jesus fulfills his promise in his Farewell Discourse of the gift of his peace which is the antidote to fear: *"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."* (14:27). This peace is given to a community who will experience the world's hatred and persecution as disciples of the one who also experienced the fullness of the world's hatred:

- "If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world – therefore the world hates you." – 15:18-19.

When Jesus shows them his hands and his side, proof that he is indeed fully present before them in bodily form, *"the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord."* (20:20). This joy is the fulfillment of Jesus' promise to them that their pain would turn to joy when they see him again: *"Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn to joy ... So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you."* (16:20, 22).

A second time, Jesus blesses his disciples with the offering of peace: *"Peace be with you."* This is not mere repetition for repetition's sake, but indicates that the disciples can receive Jesus' words as a gift of peace and not simply a greeting only after they recognize that the person who speaks to them is "the Lord." It is also the opening of Jesus' commissioning of his disciples to continue to work that he has accomplished in his ministry among them: *"As the Father has sent me, so I send you."* (20:21). The Father's sending of Jesus is an analogue for Jesus' sending of the community; Jesus commissions the faith community to continue the work God sent him to do. But in order for them to have the ability to accomplish this task, Jesus bestows on them the empowering gift of the Holy Spirit: *"When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'"* (20:22-23). The gift of the Holy Spirit is presented as that which empowers the community to continue Jesus' work, the fulfillment of his promise earlier in the Fourth Gospel:

- "On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, "Out of the believer's heart will flow rivers of living water."' Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified." – 7:37-39.

John's description of Jesus' breathing the Holy Spirit into the disciples clearly evokes the description of God's breathing the breath of life into the first human in Genesis 2:7: *"... then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being."* It also recalls Ezekiel's prophecy of breath giving life to dry bones, a metaphor for God's bringing new life to God's people: *"Then he said to me, 'Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the*

breath, Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” (37:9). This divine breath will inspire the disciples to continue to work of Jesus, including forgiveness of sins, which is understood as the spirit-empowered mission of continuing Jesus’ work in the world. The disciples are commissioned, empowered, and sent forth to continue the proclamation of the Gospel, that all *“may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”* (20:31).

As we hear this account of Jesus’ appearance to the disciples and his commissioning and empowering them for their ministry as apostles, as those who are “sent forth” to continue to work of our Lord, we may feel that once again we are in the role of spectators, watching from the sidelines as this action takes place on the mission field. But a closer look at this Gospel lesson indicates that we are not merely overhearing this story of what is happening to a certain group of Jesus’ followers, but that we are also the one who Jesus is addressing. This can be seen in the word that the Evangelist uses to identify those who are gathered together: they are named as “disciples” (*mathetai*); this is a title that John uses for a group of Jesus’ followers that includes the Twelve but is not exclusive to them (when John does refer to this core group, he uses the title “the Twelve”: *“So Jesus asked the Twelve, ‘Do you also wish to go away?’ Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.’”* (6:67-68). The “disciples” to whom the Risen Lord appears included the core group, but there is no indication that it was limited to them. This gathering of disciples represents the faith community in general, not only the apostolic leadership. Jesus’ words about forgiving and retaining sins are addressed to the entire faith community, not merely a certain few; forgiveness of sins is the work of the entire faith community that is called, empowered, and sent forth to continue to mission that Jesus instituted in his life, death, and resurrection.

- “When the church celebrates Easter, it also celebrates the beginnings of its mission ... For John, the church’s ongoing life as a community of faith, as the people who continue Jesus’ work in the world, derives from Jesus’ Easter promises and gifts.” – Gail O’Day.

When we gather together in worship, it is not in the role of spectators who observe the actions of others or cheer them on from the sidelines. We are in the place because God called us together; we may have decided which congregation we will join, but we were made members of the Church of Jesus Christ through God’s actions in Holy Baptism, when we were *“united with all the baptized in the one body of Christ, anointed with the gift of the Holy Spirit, and joined in God’s mission for the life of the world.”* When God claimed us as his children through water and the Word, God also commissioned us to be disciples as members of the community of disciples that is the Church, fulfilling our Lord’s call to *“let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.”* When we gather to hear God’s Word, it is not to overhear a word being spoken to people long ago, but a living Word addressed directly to us; this is why we announce at the end of a reading that *“this is the Word of the Lord,”* responding with the affirmative “thanks be to God” that we recognize this as the living Word addresses to us as a community of disciples who are a *“chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”* (1 Peter 2:9).

- “Christians direct their faith not to the historical figure of Jesus but to the living Lord Jesus. Yes, they assert continuity between that Jesus and this. But their faith is confirmed, not by the establishment of facts about the past, but the reality of Jesus’ power in the present. Christian faith is not directed to a human construction about the past; that would be a form of idolatry. Authentic Christian faith is a response to the living God, whom Christians declare is powerfully at work among them through the resurrected Jesus.” – Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus*.

When we come to worship, our place in the worship assembly – whether it is in the congregation, as a worship assistant, or even the person who is occupying the pulpit – is not as a spectator but as one called to be a disciple, gathered to listen to what God is proclaiming to us as a faith community, empowered by the Holy Spirit who *“calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church*

on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith" (Small Catechism), and sends us forth as Jesus sent forth his first disciples so that they might proclaim the "forgiveness of sins, life and salvation" that are at the heart of the gospel that *"the Church of Christ in every age, beset by change but Spirit led"* is called to share with all people at all times and in all places.

One of Luther's central teachings is his understanding of the Church as a "priesthood of all believers," as those who have been commissioned and empowered to continue the word of Christ in this and every generation:

- "The priesthood means: We stand before God, pray for others, intercede with and sacrifice ourselves to God and proclaim the word to one another. Luther never understands the priesthood of all believers merely in the 'Protestant' sense of the Christian's freedom to stand in a direct relationship to God without a human mediator. Rather he constantly emphasizes the Christian's evangelical authority to come before God on behalf of the brethren and also of the world. The universal priesthood expresses not religious individualism but its exact opposite, the reality of the congregation as a community." – Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*.

God calls us not to be passive spectators but active participants in God's mission among us and in the world. Our call at the end of worship – *"Go in peace, serve the Lord"* – is our call to be disciples of Christ, to go forth as the first disciples were sent in obedience to Christ's command, so that we too might *"care for all, without reserve, and spread God's liberating word."* There is a time for us to be spectators, as I discovered when it became apparent that my place was not on the field or court but in the stands; but in the Church of Jesus Christ there are no spectators, for all of us are called to be disciples, addressed by our Lord and empowered by the Spirit to actively participate in our mission which is God's mission for the sake of the world, fulfilling our roles as the priesthood of all believers who proclaim the mighty acts of the one who called us out of darkness into the marvelous light that is ours in the good news we share that Christ is risen, and because he lives, we too shall live also. Amen.