



FIRST  
PRESBYTERIAN  
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SPARTANBURG

## TELL IT LIKE IT IS

Luke 24:36-53; Galatians 1:13-23

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One of the first things we learn as children is to “say the blessing.” We fold hands or join hands and ask God to bless the food and fellowship we share around God’s table. Children take this very seriously. No peeking allowed. (Children are quick to notice who breaks the rules. “Dad, Mary Ann was looking.” “How did you know?” “I saw her.”)

No matter what blessings we offer at meals or what blessings we pronounce in church or benedictions we receive, there is something holy going on. Giving and receiving blessing goes back to the very beginning when God created men and women in the divine image and God blessed them (Gen. 1:28). Ever since that moment, we have lived our lives under God’s benediction. We walk on holy ground. One of our most familiar blessings from the Bible is the one that God teaches Aaron to give (Num. 6:24-26):

The Lord bless you and keep you.

The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you.

The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

Jesus also blessed his disciples. Very late on the first Easter, the Risen Lord appeared in

Jerusalem among the gathered disciples. After helping them understand everything that had happened and what they were called to do, Jesus went out with them to Bethany. Before he left his disciples, he raised his arms and he blessed them. His benediction would follow them into the world and be with them wherever they went. They would go many places: Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, Greece, and all the way to Rome.

Sometimes people would welcome their message and greet them with joy. They would gather around a table to eat, drink, and laugh – and tell of their experiences along the road. They would feel God’s blessing in their lives. Maybe they would go home and see their families and visit all the familiar places. At those times, their hearts would swell with a sense of blessed peace. Sometimes they would go places where they did not know a soul, but strangers would offer a cup of water, a loaf of bread, a new cloak, or just a kind word. They would remember what Jesus said about the blessings of God that come through the stranger. Then there would be days when they were mocked, arrested, beaten, or imprisoned. The blessing seemed so far away; it was as if they lived in a

godforsaken world. I like to think that when the promises of God were far away, they would remember how Jesus lifted his arms in a holy benediction and blessed them.

Jesus blessed them as he sent them out to be his witnesses. He wanted them to tell it like it is. He wanted them to share how the gospel changed their lives. He wanted them to tell others what he taught, to remember the parables he told, and to heal others of their diseases, bitterness, disappointments, and grief. He took ordinary people like you and me to tell the good news of forgiveness and life. He took farmers, fishermen, weavers, homemakers, soldiers, teachers, and tax collectors. He wanted them to share their experiences, to use their gifts to tell the truth of God.

Some years ago, I accompanied a confirmation class on an urban mission retreat to Atlanta. We stayed in a downtown church and worked at a homeless shelter. In the morning, we rose early to serve a hot breakfast at a soup kitchen hosted by a Catholic Church. After Morning Prayer, we prepared the tables in time to receive the hundreds of guests who came to eat. In a small roped-off section of the

room, a volunteer nurse practiced her special ministry. She washed the feet of the homeless. One by one, her guests took a seat as she knelt before them. She removed their old shoes, their dirty socks, and washed their feet. She treated their sores, blisters, and calluses; she anointed their feet with fragrant ointment. She gave them new socks and, whenever possible, new shoes. She knew that all those feet she touched had the potential of being beautiful feet for Christ. Her witness stands against people who say the homeless do not matter, the addicted are a lost cause, and the working poor can fend for themselves. She preached the gospel by what she did, and she refused to let anybody say that the gospel was anything less than the power of God to transform a life by the grace of Christ. When our confirmation class gathered for our devotional, they praised God because of her. She was blessed and sent by Jesus to be a witness.

Jesus even called, blessed, and commissioned a Pharisee named Saul to spread the gospel among the Gentiles. Make no mistake about it; this Saul who became Paul never pulled any punches. Paul told it just like it is.

Saul was a feisty one. He would not trade the simple truth of the gospel for some watered-down distorted version of the gospel.

He founded the churches in Galatia. He witnessed to the truth that our relationship with God is based on one thing and one thing alone – God’s grace poured out upon us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. When others came along and taught that if you wanted to be a “real” Christian you not only had to accept God’s gracious unmerited love through faith, but you also had to keep the law. That is, you had to do or perform certain things in order to be in a right relationship with God. In that way, salvation no longer depended upon God’s grace, but upon our human effort or our works. Paul basically said, “Over my dead body.” In the words we heard from Galatians, Paul tells his own story of how he received the gospel. He had an impeccable pedigree as a zealous Pharisee. He committed his life to persecuting the church until Jesus met him on the road to Damascus. There he was struck down, struck blind, and struck with a totally new understanding of God and God’s plan for his life. Christ claimed him, called him, blessed him, and sent him to be the apostle to the Gentiles. As Paul traveled throughout the Greek and Roman world, he never shied away from telling his own story, his own struggles, his own disappointments, his hopes, and his dreams. Paul was one to tell it like it is. The church in Jerusalem praised God for what Paul said and did.

What about us? Jesus has blessed us and sent us to be his witnesses. He wants us to tell it like it is. There is no power in *an artificially-sweetened, sugar-coated, whitewashed version* of the gospel. There is power when we tell our story of how Jesus enters our struggles, helps us overcome our disappointments, lifts us up from our foolish mistakes, and changes our lives. There is power when we use our gifts and experiences as nurses, accountants, students, salespersons, athletes, teachers, administrators, parents, and computer gurus to spread abroad the love of Christ. God made you the way you are for a purpose. There is a gospel story that only your life can tell. Only you can tell it like it is.

Katherine Patterson’s novel, *Jacob Have I Loved*, retells the Jacob and Essau story through the lives of twin girls, Caroline and Louise, who grow up on an island in the Chesapeake Bay. Throughout her life, Louise has lived in the shadow of her pretty and talented sister, Caroline. She feels that Caroline has robbed her of her mother’s love, her dreams of school, and even her best friend. Louise discovers that she must make her own way and find her own place away from her beloved island.

Louise becomes a nurse midwife in an isolated valley in Virginia. One night she responds to a call from a man named Joseph, a

widower with three children. His six-year-old son had a dangerously high fever. After tending to the boy, Louise accepts a cup of coffee and responds to the father's question about where she came from. She tells of her island home and all the memories of her life there. Joseph replies, "I kept wondering ever since you came. Why would a woman like you, who could have anything she wanted, come to a place like this? Now I understand... God in heaven's been raising you for this valley from the day you were born" (p. 208). In those words, she heard God's benediction upon her life. She found the place where God called her to use her gifts and her life experiences to be a witness.

Jesus has blessed you and me so that we too may be his witnesses, so that we too can tell it like it is. God has been raising us all our life for this moment and for this place. We bear witness to the Christian faith. It is not a set of rules to live by, a faith based on fear and judgment, a religion that says "no" and never "yes," or a miserable, restrictive, and burdensome way of living. It is the story of your life and my life. It is the story of God weaning us away from our selfishness, helping us face our addictions, teaching us how to love unconditionally, and showing us how to give joyfully. Sometimes God has to knock us off our

horses and pick us up again so that we may tell the truth. Jesus leads us from sin to grace, from fear to joy, from suspicion to love, and from bondage to freedom.

Tell your story.

Tell it just like it is.

As you receive the benediction at the end of the service, remember that God is sending you to out to be a witness – to tell the story that only you call tell.

Tell it just like it is. Amen.