

Session 8

Witnessing Love

Witnessing love may be the most important skill for organizing and anchoring a vital circle of Resurgent Christian nurture and mission. Witnessing love can be defined as being a “means of grace” to one another in our Circle and to other persons with whom we make contact.

“Grace,” as this word is used in the letters of the apostle Paul, is an event that happens to us. In his sermon “You Are Accepted,” Paul Tillich describes the happening of “grace” as an experience of reunion with Reality, an event that has three parts: (1) an awakening to our estrangement from Reality, (2) a dawning of our welcome home to Reality, and (3) a choice to accept and live this welcome.

Witnessing love is the skill of assisting another person to experience the grace happening. We must say “assisting,” not “causing,” for the actual happening of grace is beyond the control of the witness. Final Reality itself must do the dawning in the life of the other, and the other person must himself or herself experience the estrangement, and must experience the welcome home, and accept that specific welcome home to Reality. The witness is powerless to control Final Reality or the other person. Nevertheless, the witness has the power to focus the attention of the other person on “noticing” the possibility of a transforming happening of grace.

Like grace, witnessing love has three parts: **(1) Exposing the demons** (i.e. bringing consciousness to bear upon the interiorly organized patterns that estrange a person from being his or her true being), **(2) Welcoming the sinner** (i.e. pointing out that person’s welcome home to Reality in spite of that person’s estrangement from Reality), and **(3) Beckoning the saint** (i.e. encouraging the real person to choose the welcome home and to walk within that home place). All three of these aspects of witnessing love challenge both the person bearing witness and the person to whom the witness is made.

(1) Exposing the demons challenges the **sentimentality** of the witness. Because of his or her own sentimental estrangement, the witness is tempted to underplay the destructive nature of the “demons.” A sentimental witness is tempted to minimize or excuse the “demons,” rather than confront them with strong emotions and brash assertiveness. The term “demon” is old poetry for what we today call estrangement from Reality: addictions, entrenched patterns, destructive habits, malice, bondage, despair. Perhaps the image of “demon” has endured because it pictures estrangement from our true being as a powerful phenomenon that robs people of authentic life and issues in faulty knowing, inauthentic being, and unrealistic action.

(2) Welcoming the sinner challenges the witness’s **moralism**. The moralistic witness is tempted to resist pointing out Reality’s welcome to persons who have been seriously demon-possessed and badly behaved. The moralistic witness resists the audacity of universal forgiveness and is inclined to say, “Maybe some are forgiven, but surely some are not.” We must bear in mind that if all are not forgiven, then none are forgiven.

(3) Beckoning the saint challenges the witness’s **rationalism**. The rationalistic witness tries to persuade the other person to agree with something rather than challenging that person to choose freedom – that is, to make the deep choice of accepting the welcome home to Reality. It is rationalism for the witness to reason with the other person rather than point out the either-or moment that the other person faces: either continue in estrangement and its despair-riddled consequences, or open up to realism, however dreadful, unfamiliar, and intense it may be. Further, the witness needs to recognize the

solitary nature of the other person's decision. Neither manipulation nor trickery is necessary or useful. Coming home means finding one's own Freedom in that home place – a Freedom not created by human hands but given directly from the Final Reality being experienced.

(1) Exposing the Demons

In the 15th chapter of Luke, Jesus tells the story of the prodigal son to an assembly that includes Pharisees and scribes. These religious teachers surely identify more with the elder son who stayed home and did his duty than with the son who took his inheritance and squandered it. This elder son resented the father's forgiving the renegade brother and complained about the celebration held upon the return of this rascal. Jesus' story exposes the self-righteousness of the moral teachers who are listening. The whole point of the story is that Final Reality forgives, indeed celebrates, our return to Reality. But according to the Pharisees and scribes, this was not the way the universe works. In their view righteousness is rewarded and unrighteousness is punished. Furthermore, they think they know which is which. In Jesus' story, he makes the prodigal son a thoroughly objectionable character to these moralists. And when the father in the story goes all out with kisses and robes and rings and shoes and a fatted-calf feast, these moralists surely identify with the elder brother's fury and complaints. The scribes and Pharisees in the crowd are not open to welcoming the tax collectors, riffraff, and other "outsiders" who are also listening to this story. Jesus has exposed their smug "self righteousness."

We may not be accustomed to calling self-righteousness a "demon," but the meanness of racism, anti-immigration sentiments, and the rigid righteousness of so many religious bodies points up the seriousness of the elder brother's pattern of estrangement. Exposing such "demons" is daring work, for demons do not want to be exposed as demons. Indeed, they may appear in the garb of saintliness. But demons lie. So, the saintly garb must be stripped away and the nude demon exposed. Sometimes estranged persons are aware that they have issues, but tell themselves that these issues are unimportant or excusable. Again, the witness needs to be stern to focus consciousness on the destructive extent of this form of demonic inhabitation.

In other words, the effective witness must take estrangement seriously. Estrangements from Reality are well-organized, destructive, and defensive. We exist in a world in which we experience an emotionally intense battle between truth and systems of evasion and illusion. Our resistance to engaging in this tough fight is a form of sentimentality. The effective witness notices the deep conflict between authenticity and inauthenticity. At the Spirit level of living, truth and falsehood can never be a both-and compromise. We either win our freedom over our demonic patterns or we become enslaved to them.

The honest witness to Truth feels an ongoing anger toward the estrangement that are destroying human life. A love of human life includes anger toward the demons, an anger clearly present in the witnessing of Jesus as portrayed in the Gospels. We see his anger when he "lays into" the hypocrisy and tyranny of the scribes and Pharisees, when he overturns the tables in the Temple, when he orders demonic forces to desist. Jesus also expresses anger toward his own disciples who are slow to learn or who fall asleep when needed. At one point he even accuses Peter of being captive to Satan's perspective. But this wholesome anger is not a restimulation of old hurts in Jesus' life. Jesus was not having temper tantrums. The anger of the true witness is a passion for truth and for Spirit health. If we do not admit that we have this anger, this rage against the demons, we are not prepared to be witnesses to the New Testament good news.

Human estrangement from Reality is strong: it can ruin families, communities, nations, and planets. Nevertheless, though these "demonic possessions" are powerful,

they are basically nothing, nothing essential to any person's real life. A demon is an omission, an absence of Reality, an illusion, an untruth, a falsification. Therefore, a demon is no threat to an authentic person except as a temptation to cease being authentic. When a demon is cast out, it vanishes into nothingness, for it was never substantial. It was only a false relationship with something. In our behaviors the demonic is not merely our habitual behaviors; it is our attitude of attachment to and defensiveness of those behaviors. That attitude can vanish suddenly, even though the behaviors may persist for a while. Though demons are essentially nothing, our war with them is real, as real as the crucifixion of Jesus. The war with the demons is urgent, as urgent as despair or joy (hell or heaven).

An effective witness to the New Testament good news needs to be honestly stern with the demons. The effective witness needs to move beyond his or her own sentimentality. The despair, futility, and malice of demonic possession are deeply entrenched, and exposing these demons requires words and deeds that are strong, clever, and unhampered by sentimentality.

(2) Welcoming the Sinner

The story of the prodigal son can also be viewed from the perspective of the prodigal – i.e. those who are already aware of their estrangement from that all-powerful Finality and from their own essential selves. Such persons, feeling their despair and self incrimination, would surely identify with the prodigal son. They would also be addressed by the the father's excessive celebration of his return. Here the address is about turning loose of self-incrimination and hopelessness and taking in the truth that a fresh start is possible. With the enthusiastic welcome of the wayward son, Jesus witnesses to the welcome that all of us can experience from Final Reality, our Infinite Parent. Witnessing love includes making this welcome known.

Once the "sinner has seen and owned up to the estrangement or "demon," he or she needs to see that he or she is welcome home to Reality. Pointing out this welcome is assertive care on the part of the witness. It may take strong words to call the estranged person's attention to the fact that he or she is a good and innocent being who has been possessed by the strong force of estrangement. Our real lives are never far away; we, in our demonic possession, have been far away from our real lives. Our real lives are saintly, completely affirmed by Reality. Our actual inward being, our actual outward being, and all our circumstances are the one and only wholesome truth and goodness. Our demons are just phantoms. Our past, however demon possessed, has brought us to this wholly real and good moment of repentance and openness to realistic living. And our future – however scary, however fraught with unfamiliar realism, however tempted to further demonic possession – is wondrously open to Freedom, Trust of Reality, and the Love of our own lives and the lives of others.

The task of the competent witness is to underline these simple actualities. As sinners who are used to our demon-possessed lives, we doubt that living can be different. We do not readily trust the good news that we are fully capable of identifying with our realistic innocence. The skillful witness points this out in the hope that this person will see the light of his or her welcome home to Reality. This Welcome comes not from the witness, but from "The Ground of our Being." Welcome is the character of Final Reality – so it always has been, is now, and shall ever be. You are accepted; I am accepted; everyone is accepted.

(3) Beckoning the Saint

When estrangement is revealed and the welcome home is pronounced, the true witness is still not done. For the happening of grace to be complete, the person to whom the witness is made has to decide to accept the welcome home. This choice

cannot be made by the person making the witness and the one to whom the witness is made cannot be manipulated into making this choice. This choice is a bold, independent, solitary opting for Truth. The witnessing person needs to stand back and let this choice happen (or not). Perhaps the witnessing person needs to virtually (or literally) walk away in order to dramatize that this decision can only be made by the person to whom witness has been offered. In whatever way, the witness simply beckons the saintliness of the other person to step down from some safe boat of habituated living onto the unfamiliar waters of real life. The power of the witness's beckoning is increased by the witness's own acceptance of Reality's pardon, and his or her own demonstration of realistic living.

In the story told in Matthew 14:22-32, Jesus is already walking on the water. Peter asks to join him. And Jesus says, "Come on then." That is the beckoning witness. Peter must then himself step down from the safe boat and walk on the water. And when Peter loses faith and begins to sink yet again into still other estrangement, it is Peter and Peter alone who must reach out for the welcome home to Reality. The revelation of Final Reality is always there and is already walking on the water offering a hand. But Peter must himself take the hand. Peter must himself accept his welcome of the Divine Welcome Home to Peter's own essential saintliness, a saintliness that is not Peter's accomplishment but the simple gift of Peter's full reality.

* * * * *

I have used New Testament stories to illustrate Witnessing Love, but witnessing can occur without religious language. Anytime we assist someone to see their real fight with or flight from realism, to experience their welcome home to a fresh start, and then beckon them to step out into that freshness, we have done witnessing love. This can occur in a secular office, working outdoors, playing, dancing, visiting, wherever. Witnessing is seldom easy, often a bit scary, never certain of a good result, but witnessing love is a gift to humanity without which human life does not move forward into better days.