

BLIND AND DEAF WITNESSES

I have a friend that I serve on different presbytery committees with who always says, “The Presbytery needs to do a better job of explaining our identity. People don’t know who we are as Presbyterians.” That may be true, but maybe it’s more true to say that WE Presbyterians don’t know who we are. When you ask my friend “well ok, who are we?” he can’t answer the question.

We have tried to define, or redefine, ourselves multiple times during my lifetime. In the early 80’s, we “committed” to 10 years of evangelism...or we tried to. I didn’t even remember we did that, so I guess it wasn’t very successful.

We tried starting classes and sermons with “the issues,” then pulling an appropriate scripture into the discussion...but no one really wanted to change what they already thought, so we just argued in Sunday school and went home frustrated because we couldn’t come to an agreement about who we, the people of God, should be—and scripture got relegated to an aside.

Mega-churches seemed successful. We decided that’s who we should be. We all tried to become like the mega-churches...buying their materials and implementing their programming, to the best of our tiny-church-limited-resource ability. It just wasn’t who we were.

We tried contemporary worship. Really, unless you can get drums on your chancel and a praise choir in your line-up, (we were told) you didn’t stand a chance of being a church in the 21st century. Now the church experts are telling us that contemporary worship attendance is declining.

Our favorite practice today is trying to be all things to all people...casual coffee shop worship, services that don’t use prayers or liturgy or never mentioning Jesus Christ or the Triune God because that is way too complicated to explain.

We really don’t know who we are—and we find ourselves in the exact same place as the people to whom the prophet in Second Isaiah spoke. They didn’t know who they were either.

They thought their identity was temple worship until it wasn’t. When the temple was destroyed, they didn’t know who they were.

They thought their identity as the chosen people of God was the land...until the land belonged to other empires. So who were they now?

They too, had tried many things...a golden calf, and an earthly King...to name a couple.

These are the people that the prophet describes as blind and deaf... seeing but not observing, taking in a cacophony of sound, but not hearing.

We are in the exact same place. We, like them, have looked everywhere to find our identity. We look to our nationality, our leisure activities, our political affiliation, our feelings, our cultural preferences. And it seems that we, too, are blind and deaf people of God.

Does that bother you? It does me...that’s not a good place to be. How will we ever know who we are if we can’t see and hear?!

Listen for the Word of God...

Do not fear...I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

Who are we? What is our identity? The creator of the universe, maker of heaven and earth has claimed us. I have called you by name, you are mine. And why? Because we can see and hear? Because we have our act together...the highly competent people of God?

I don't think so...The creator of the universe, maker of heaven and earth claims us—Because we are precious in God's sight, and honored, and God loves us.

We are certainly not because we have drums in our chancels or have fought on one side or the other on any church controversy. Certainly not because we keep God's law or have this faith thing down pat.

“I have called you by name, you are mine...because I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.” Identity is God's work, not ours. And the news gets better!

God doesn't call us because we have it figured out...because really, none of us have it figured out...God calls us--in spite of being us.

“Bring forth the people who are blind, yet have eyes, who are deaf, yet have ears!

God gathers God's flawed people from the east and the west, the north and the south, from the ends of the earth...God gathers us...we who are blind and deaf. And, you will note, God doesn't cure our blindness or our deafness—not before we are called and not after we are called together.

God calls the blind and deaf as.....his.....witnesses.

To witness for God?.....us?.....the blind and the deaf?

And some deep panic sets in. How do *WE* witness for God? Because we know we are blind and deaf. And we know the blind and deaf are horrible witnesses. And we *are* terrible, horrible, no-good witnesses—if this is about us. If we allow God's Spirit to unstop our ears just for a moment—to open our eyes to the Creator in our midst—we are redirected.

You are my witnesses, says the LORD, and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me. I, I am the LORD, and besides me there is no savior. I declared and saved and proclaimed when there was no strange god among you; and you are my witnesses says the LORD.

There's good news here. We are God's witnesses not because we are articulate, or marketing savvy, or because we even understand how this works, or live really good lives as really nice people.

We are God's witnesses because it is GOD who loves, God who saves, God who calls us together for God's glory.

“...bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth—everyone one who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.

You are my witnesses, says the LORD... And brothers and sisters, if we, the blind, deaf, and broken, are God’s witnesses, then the love and saving power of God is mighty indeed.

Honestly, there is no more ridiculous people than the people of Israel. They well deserved the title “stiff-necked.” And, I think, so do we.

The miracle is this: We, the stiff-necked, blind, and deaf are precious in God’s sight and called to be God’s people. God invites us to recognize we are God’s. God invites us to participate in God’s work of reconciliation, redemption, and transformation.

“You are my witnesses, my servants whom I have chosen.” That’s our invitation. That’s our identity. That gives purpose and meaning and call to our lives. That is our best chance of acting in ways that bring health and wholeness to the entire creation—imagine God’s *shalom* enacted everywhere.

We are the people of God...named and claimed. We are called to be witnesses to all those outside these walls who we know are also named and claimed by God.

We, the stiff-necked, blind, and deaf must trust that in obedience, and God’s glory will transform our best efforts into the transformation only the Spirit can bring.

I’m there. Are you?

Holy Spirit, move in us and reveal the miracle of your redemptive work in which you invite us to participate. In the name of the Triune God...Father, Son, and Spirit. Amen.