

Sunday, January 19, 2014: Isaiah 49:1-7; John 1:29-42

by [William H. Willimon](#) in the [January 8, 2014](#) issue

My father-in-law said that when he began ministry six decades ago, pastors were expected to visit the sick, preach and do a little teaching in the congregation. Now it takes me an entire semester just to skim the surface of “must-have competences” in an Ordained Leadership class. And the list is growing.

In the fourth Gospel, John the Baptist performs only one ministerial function: testimony. Unlike Luke or Matthew, John gives us none of the Baptizer’s scathing sermons or dire warnings. Here the Baptist is an unimposing preacher who is “not the light”; his sole purpose is to bear testimony to the light. Though some think John might be Elijah or a new prophet, John says he is only a “voice crying in the wilderness.” The first act of the drama of Jesus, then, is this insubstantial voice modestly pointing away from himself toward Another.

Is this enough?

A list of clergy competencies required by the Methodist Board of Ordained Ministry mentions neither “witness” nor “testimony” as essential work for pastors.

By nature, witness is a modest vocation. A witness is one who has seen and heard something significant. When I was summoned to testify in a child custody suit between two warring parents in my congregation, I realized that the court had little interest in my beliefs about parenthood or my professional opinion about either parent’s spiritual depth. All the court wanted to know was my testimony: tell what you have seen and heard.

John’s testimonials are lacking in content and repetitious: “Look! The Lamb of God!” Yet on the basis of his witness two of his followers become Jesus’ first disciples. Having seen, John testifies so that others might see. Later, when inquirers ask Jesus what he’s up to, Jesus says simply, “Come and see.”

As Karl Barth said, anybody who stops on the sidewalk and points upward will draw a crowd of onlookers, each one looking up to see what’s captured another’s attention. That’s my theory for why people still gather on Sunday morning to hear me, a frail,

fallible preacher who is less attractive than Joel Osteen and less practical than Rick Warren. Perhaps pop TV preachers have enabled the church again to marvel at the wonder of an artless human being standing up and witnessing to the truth.

“Keep your church talk to yourself,” directed a local missionary at the soup kitchen. “We’re here to help people in need.” I reassured him that neither he nor the homeless had anything to fear—we mainline Protestants would rather hand out a bowl of soup than risk telling someone the truth. It’s less disruptive than to testify to that person that we wouldn’t be serving him or her if Jesus had not put us here. After all, as we learn when Herod silences John, testifiers to the truth threaten the world just by talking truth.

Missiologist Lamin Sanneh says that humility is at the heart of Christian mission because this faith—unlike “spirituality”—must be received from another. No one is born into this faith. Nobody stumbles upon it after walking in the woods or rummaging around in one’s ego. Christians are recipients, never initiators. Here is truth that can be had only with receptive, empty, open hands. Someone had to love us enough to show and to tell the story. We know what we know only through epiphany—that is, witness, testimony. Sanneh says that Christianity is training in receptivity, learning to be gratefully dependent on the testimony of others.

Paul demanded neither intelligence nor spiritual acumen from that gaggle of pagans at Corinth; simple receptivity to the foolish word about the cross was enough. “We preach not ourselves,” said Paul (2 Cor. 4:5); we preach Christ with ourselves as witnesses.

When I’m made king of United Methodism, which will happen any day, I’ll ask only one epiphanic question of candidates for ministry: Have you seen or heard anything from God worth testifying to another?

Elsewhere Jesus calls himself the “light of the world.” Here, through the testimony of a witness, Jesus makes us lights in the dark. Isaiah’s promise is fulfilled: “I will give you as a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

Karl Barth kept a print of the Isenheim altarpiece over his desk. As he churned out his *Church Dogmatics* he kept his eyes fixed on John the Baptist depicted by Matthias Grünewald as a witness with one hand holding a Bible and the other pointing away from himself toward the gruesome sight of a crucified God.

That's me this Sunday after the Epiphany. Nothing much to look at, degraded by six decades of ministry, with a lousy voice for pulpit work, pointing away from myself to the truth of God, and praying for the guts to once more tell what I've seen and heard.