

CONNECTED WITNESSES

Did anyone here this morning want to be a firefighter when they were growing up? I didn't. It's not that I didn't think what they did was cool. Oh, I did. Really, I think it would be hard for any little boy to see fire engines, and the uniforms, and spraying water out of hydrants and come away with the idea that firefighters aren't cool. In fact, even as an adult, I still think it's pretty neat to see firefighters riding by in an engine. So a couple of years ago, when I took my son, Nate, and a friend of his to a "work trucks" display at the library, I didn't turn down the opportunity to climb up in the front of one when one of the firemen there invited me. Very cool.

Still, even at a young age, I was able to understand that a firefighter's job was a serious-and potentially dangerous-way to make a living. I remember when I was about 5 or 6 years old, picking up the phone and dialing randomly in the hope that I might reach the local fire department. This was back in the day when real, live operators were on hand, and though the operator I kept getting was not at all happy about the way I was dialing, she did finally connect me to the fire department, where one of the firefighters picked up. I don't remember much about the conversation, but I do remember that I had one important question I needed to make sure I had answered. I asked the man on the other end of the phone, "If something happens here at my house, and we need you, will you be here to help us?" And he assured me several times that he and his fellow firefighters would.

I slept well that night, knowing that nice man who was kind enough to take a few minutes out of his busy day for a little boy had promised he would be there when we needed him.

When I think about it, the fire department is an interesting study in contrasts. First, we all know that there is a special camaraderie among those who fight fires for a living. That's especially true of those who must work together on a regular basis. They are a tightly knit group. They know that they will be facing life and death situations together-both for themselves and for those they are called out to help-and it's incredibly important for them to be able to trust one another. They need to be able to count on each other. So they build close bonds with one another. One firefighter's family becomes another's extended family. All of us got to see this lived out admirably following the attacks of 9/11, when the families of first responders in New York who perished in the towers were surrounded and cared for by surviving firefighters and their families. It was a touching display of love and devotion and intense connection. No firefighter was willing to let a fallen comrade's family suffer or fall on hard times. Everyone was there for everyone else.

Yet, with all of the community and interdependence that seems to come with being a firefighter, there is also an individual side to the work. For as much as they rely on one another as a team, each person on the team must do his or her own job. Now, roles might change according to the mission, or even during a particular call depending on what happens, but there is still a personal responsibility that each person must carry out on his or her own. Not every firefighter climbs the ladder. Not every firefighter drives the truck. Not every firefighter enters the burning building looking for survivors. They all have different tasks that they must complete.

Still, even though they may have different responsibilities, they understand there is a singleness of purpose. Even though one person might be manning the hydrant while another is directing the hose, both know they are there to save people. Yes, it would probably be nice if they

could keep the fire from entirely destroying the structure, but they also know that buildings can be replaced; people cannot. At the same time, even though they may be working individually, they are also acting as representatives of something greater than themselves. Obviously they represent those who work in public safety, but even more than that, they represent the communities in which they work, and the care and concern communities show for their members by levying taxes to pay for services like fire and police.

What an incredible line of work! Firefighters are united by their calling, their identity, their mission and who they represent, and carry that into the work they do independently toward the common goal. Not only that, but what an appropriate word illustration they make for us as we consider two more descriptors of what it means to be a fully devoted follower of Christ this morning, being connected and being witnesses.

When we talk of being connected, this is how we explained it: "Fully devoted followers are faithfully committed to and active in our church. They are involved together in service, growth, worship and fellowship." In regard to the idea of being witnesses, this is what we said: "Our Lord called us to be his witnesses. We represent Christ to our world, striving to give credible personal testimony to the reality of Jesus and his Gospel."

What does the example of firefighters have to do with these two descriptors? Quite a bit, really. But in order for us to understand it, we need to take a step back and talk about two things that are very similar between fully devoted followers of Christ and firefighters: identity and mission.

If any of you have known a firefighter personally, you know that their personal identity is caught up very much in the work of fighting fires. I have an old high school friend who is a firefighter, and when you visit his Facebook page on the Internet, it is filled with references to his work. Likewise, having been saved by Jesus, our primary identity is found in him. As Galatians 3:26-28 teaches us, "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." When we received Christ, the categories that used to classify us-nationality, social status, even gender-all became secondary to the fact that we belong to Jesus. We have, as the verse puts it, "clothed ourselves with Christ." We are Christians first and foremost.

Now, identity automatically brings with it mission. As we said before, firefighters know that their mission is to save people. As followers of Christ, we have a built-in mission as well, from Matthew 28: to make disciples. (Mt. 28:19)

So what do our identity and mission have to do with the two descriptors we're talking about today? Our identity and mission make being connected and being witnesses essential to us. We cannot truly be followers of Christ and not be connected or witnesses.

Let me explain by starting with this idea of being witnesses. Being a witness basically means we are following through on our mission. According to the Bible, we can't be a follower of Christ and not carry out the mission he gave us. As Jesus, himself, said, "If you love me, you will obey what I command." (Jn. 14:15) If we are Christ followers-if Jesus is our Lord and Savior-then we have our marching orders. If we are truly Christians, we cannot opt out of being witnesses. Being a witness is indispensable to being a fully devoted follower of Christ.

Being a witness also means that we must be ready to testify, right? I know I'm using some older church language here, but in keeping with the picture we've used to represent this idea of being a witness, the entire purpose of a witness is to report what he or she has been a witness to,

or what he or she knows. Witnesses aren't impartial bystanders; they speak for or against someone or something. When we received Christ, he called us to be his witnesses to the world, so we need to be prepared to give our testimony whenever the opportunity arises. (1 Pet. 3:15) Even more, we are to represent Christ-to serve as his ambassadors, if you will-so that when people see and hear us, they actually see Jesus in and through us. (1 Pet. 3:16)

This witnessing, then, happens not only through our words, but through the things we do (and sometimes don't do). It happens through how we make priorities, how we use money and how we spend free time. And it is supposed to happen no matter where we are or what we do, whether we're at work or on vacation, whether we're at home, school or home school, whether we're with family, friends or complete strangers... As we go and do, we are to be Christ's witnesses, carrying out the mission he gave us.

So, we've covered the idea of being witnesses, but how does being connected relate? Well, let's go back to our example of firefighters. Because they are firefighters, they know they have a mission: to save people. But they also know that, on their own, they would be pretty ineffective against many of the fires that happen. Imagine having a fire start in the place you live, and having a single person show up to fight the blaze. That one person is pulling up in the truck, getting the hose out, hooking it up to the fire hydrant, trying to determine where the fire is at and how bad it is, trying to find if there is anyone still in the place, and so on. That doesn't exactly sound very effective, does it? But firefighters understand that their mission is so important that they need each other in order to carry the mission out.

Guess what? We have an important mission too. In fact, I would humbly say that our mission is even more important than a firefighter's, because ours doesn't involve just this life, but the next as well. Our mission has eternal consequences. And, let's not kid ourselves, our mission can be just as dangerous as a firefighter's if not more so. That might not be true for us here this morning, but there are Christians whose lives are in danger right now in places like China, Pakistan, Egypt and Indonesia because they are being witnesses and carrying out the mission of Jesus. This mission is too big and too important for any one of us to carry entirely on our own. We need each other.

Thankfully, that's the way God intended for things to be for believers. More than any of us, he comprehends the enormity of the work he has called us to, so he made a way for us to be able to connect to better carry out our mission: the church. When we receive Christ, we automatically get membership into this worldwide group of people who are followers of his. More than that, we are adopted into God's family, given the right to be called children of God, making us brothers and sisters in Christ. (Jn. 1:12) God gives us a ready-made family network to tap into to serve and be served by.

Still, family is often what you make of it. Just because we are family doesn't make it good. It is up to us to work at being a good family, and that work starts with commitment to one another. I've been reading and studying about the breakdown in American families and how that is affecting some of the younger generations. One of the leading causes in the degeneration of the family has been the increasing lack of commitment. People do not want to commit to one another for fear that something better might come along, and an increasing number of them are bypassing marriage altogether. But tell me: Without commitment, how can there be trust?

Families aren't the only ones suffering from a lack of commitment. Recently I spoke with some folks who infrequently attend Bethel. During the discussion, they told me that they really didn't think of Bethel as their "church home." Instead, Bethel was simply one of many churches

they visited from time to time when it was convenient or when they felt Bethel had something important to offer them. It saddened me to hear them talk about Bethel like that. Unfortunately, these folks are part of a growing number of people who treat church like something you shop for, as if it were a product or service. But the church is not a building or a program or a personality or a product; it is a family. Yet if we, as church family members, are constantly leaving each other or waiting for someone better to come along, what happens to the trust that is supposed to be fostered between us? And what happens to the mission we're supposed to be carrying out? I'll tell you: there is no trust, and the mission is forgotten.

We can't let that happen. I know that probably every generation has said this, but I think it bears repeating: If ever there was a time when our world desperately needed Jesus, it's now. Our mission is too important for us to not together. We need each other; the Bible makes it clear that we're each specially gifted to serve the rest of us. (Rom. 12:4-5) The apostle Paul even goes so far to compare us to different parts of the human body which are vital to the life and performance of the body as whole. We cannot accomplish what we're meant to without everyone participating.

And we really do need to be a "good family." We need to be committed to one another. We need for a deep trust to exist among us; we need to know that we can count on one another. If we're truly serious about being witnesses, then we understand just how difficult that work can be, and we need to know that our brothers and sisters will be there to love us, encourage us, support us, pray for us, and sometimes give us the swift kick in the rear we need to get up and get going.

We can deepen our commitment to and trust with one another by engaging in the things we've listed here for being connected. We build camaraderie by serving with each other and serving one another, recognizing that we truly are on the same team. When we invest in our spiritual growth individually and together, we cannot help but come away with a bigger heart for each other and for our mission. When we prioritize and are involved in worship, we affirm our identity in Jesus and our submission to him. And when we spend time together in fellowship, we get the chance to know and appreciate each other, both for our similarities and differences.

As it just so happens, I heard a story this past week of two women who attend Bethel who happened to bump into each other. One of them has attended for 8 years, the other for at least 4. As they talked, the topic of church came up, and one asked the other where she attended. They had been coming to Bethel for a combined 12 years and did not know each other. If there is someone sitting around you this morning you do not know, or only know by sight, take a moment before you leave to greet that person. If you're not serving in some capacity, get involved and share your gifts. If you were planning to eat lunch by yourself today, invite somebody along. We need each other-we truly do-and the more we can do to foster the connection between us, the better.

A fully devoted follower of Christ is a connected witness. We are identified and united by Jesus and his cause. So we invest in committed relationships with one another in order to continue the work of representing Jesus to our world and sharing the good news about him through both our words and our lives. We need each other to carry out the critical mission he's given us.