

BELPRES CHURCH

Can I Get a Witness?

1 Peter 2:1-12

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Well, hello, those of you in the sanctuary. So great to have you, as well as those of you here in the room online, wherever you are, it's so great to be here on Baptism Sunday. This is one of my favorite Sundays, so thank you for joining us.

We've been doing a sermon series on how we become transformed to be more like Jesus and have more of his hope, courage, joy, and all of that stuff, which we need, because as we've been saying in these last couple of weeks, given the rates of anxiety, depression, loneliness, divisiveness in our culture, stress, the ways we are pursuing happiness in our culture are not working.

I saw an ad this week that said the reason you don't have love in your life is your muscles aren't big enough. Oh, how do you know? I need new muscles or I'm never going to be loved. That's our culture's definition of happiness. Happiness is bigger muscles, bigger bank accounts, bigger number of people that like you and follow you and all of that stuff. It's not working.

But there are some spiritual practices that have a 2000-year track record of transforming us to be like Jesus and have more of his courage, hope and joy. And as we've said, we are all engaging in practices that are transforming us. The question is by what and into what. If we engage in the practice of too much social media, we are going to experience two emotions, primarily anger at what people say and feeling inadequate because everyone else's life seems better than ours. We are all engaging in practices that transform us. The question is into what?

And Jesus says, "I love you and I have a better way." And one of the practices that transform us to be like him is witness. In other words for that is evangelism, which is a

Greek word that means good news, good newsing people about Jesus. Now, that word, evangelism, it conjures up all kinds of negative images of angry people outside T-Mobile Park, yelling at people, "Have you heard the good news? You're going to hell." That's not what we're talking about. Done right, being a witness for Jesus blesses everybody, including us, because when we are witnesses, it helps us be more like Jesus, more of his hope, courage, love and joy.

I have talked about Jesus with Uber drivers and Stanford professors and people in my gym and next door neighbors, and nobody has ever once been offended. Sometimes they've even said, "Thank you." And I have always felt joy because when I'm a witness for what Jesus has done in my life and in the lives of other people, I am reminding myself of the goodness of God. And that makes me grateful, and gratitude produces hope, courage and joy. And being a witness for Jesus involves two things. Show and tell. Show people who Jesus is by how we live and tell people about Jesus with our words. And we're pretty comfortable with the show part of that, but not so comfortable with the tell part of that. But at some point we have to say the name of Jesus. And we've preached a lot of sermons on how to do the tell part, we've done a lot of those sermons last couple of years on how to do the tell part. So for today, I just want to focus on the show part.

Being a witness for Jesus is living in a way that points to him. Not as a substitute for words, but as part of the words we say. We both speak and live our words. And we're going to see that in today's text, which is out of the book of First Peter and it says this, "Dear friends, I urge you live such good lives among the pagans that though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God." Let's break that down a little. "Dear friends, I urge you live such good lives." Now, when we think of the word good, we think of sort of morally good, which that's what that means. But in the original Greek that this was written in, the word there is kalen, which can also mean beautiful. Beautiful, that changes it, doesn't it? Beautiful. Live such a beautiful life that others are attracted to Jesus.

Now, just because I know my audience and we're Eastsiders and we're overachievers, I just want to point out what it does not say, it does not say live a perfect life. It says live a beautiful life. It doesn't say be the perfect student or the perfect athlete or the perfect parent or the perfect Christian. It doesn't say that.

A number of years ago, a woman in our church told me about a teenager in the youth group who was sneaking out of her house at night and her parents didn't know. And this kid wasn't doing anything terrible, just kind of sneaking out, hanging with her friends, but still sneaking out. And we talked for a while and I said, "Oh yeah, that's kind of tough." And at one point I said, "I'm just glad our kids can't do that because their bedrooms are on the second floor and it's too far to jump. And if they tried to get out the door at night, the alarm would sound." Well, about a month later, I went to the side of our house I normally don't go to, and there was a very tall ladder right up against my daughter's

window and I have a sinking feeling which kid is sneaking out at night. It's the pastor's kid.

Now the ladder was left there by the folks who painted our house that summer. So I called them, they took the ladder away. A few days later, my daughter was getting a little combative with me, which was kind of rare. So I said, "Are you okay?" And she said, "You took my ladder away." "Your ladder?" Again, she wasn't doing anything terrible, just hanging out with her friends, but sneaking out, that's not cool.

As a pastor, I sometimes feel like I need be perfect, be the perfect parent, have perfect kids. You guys have never put that on me, you just kind of feel that sometimes. Well, that story shows I am not the perfect parent. We are not the perfect family. But this text doesn't say live perfect Eastside lives. Perfect GPA, perfect job, perfect college, perfect kids.

It says, live beautiful lives, which often includes things like how Jesus works through your suffering and pain to bring good, how you overcome failure, how he works through your working weaknesses. Because here's the thing, nobody likes perfect people, right? Perfect people are irritating, right? But everybody likes seeing how Jesus makes beautiful things out of our hurts, failures, sins and flaws as well, as our victories and as our joys. Live such a beautiful life among, not separated off in a Christian bubble, among people at school or work or baseball games or grocery stores. Among the pagans, which to us sounds like a negative word, but it wasn't back then. Romans just referred to themselves as pagan. It just means somebody who doesn't follow Jesus.

Live such a beautiful life among people so that though they accuse you of doing wrong, the early Christians were accused of all kinds of things, most frequently of being unpatriotic because even though they obeyed the emperor, they refused to say that the emperor was God, so they were considered unpatriotic Romans. Though they accuse you of being uptight or superstitious or unintelligent or out of step with the culture, they may see your good, same word there, that is beautiful deeds. They may see your beautiful way of living and glorify God. And in the original Greek, another way to translate glorify God is so that they form a right opinion about God. Live such beautiful lives that people form a right opinion about God because they see him in you. That's how we good news people.

Years ago on a trip to Rwanda, there was a man on that trip who whenever he would see some kids, he'd wave and say this phrase in Kinyarwanda that he thought was a Rwandan greeting, but the kids would sometimes scream and run away from him. It turned out what he was saying is not a Rwandan greeting. He was saying, "I'm going to eat you." So some of these kids had never seen an American before, and here comes this American, "I'm going to eat you." That's kind of how some folks have done evangelism,

right? We've scared people and they've run away screaming. But this text says, being a witness is living in a way that shows people who Jesus really is, and then telling them about Jesus because we have to do that too.

And that's what those first early Christians did. In the sexual promiscuity that was rampant in the Roman Empire, because Romans viewed sex as just an appetite to be satisfied, people were drawn to Jesus because he said, sex is reserved for one person and one person only, and it's a way of saying, I belong to you completely and permanently and only you. People found that way more fulfilling. In the very sexist Roman culture of the time, people wondered, why do you Christians treat women as equals? That's not what Romans do. Why are you Christians willing to look weak by being honest about your flaws and your failures and apologizing to people when you hurt them? Why don't you defend yourself like every other good Roman does?

And some people found the Christian's way of living off-putting, but others, hundreds of thousands of people, were drawn to it and it grew 40% per decade for 300 years, the fastest growing movement in all of human history ever. And it wasn't the beauty of their Instagram pages, it wasn't how they virtue signaled that they held all the right political opinions to please their tribe. It was how Christians, how beautiful life that they lived, how they loved not just each other, but even the people that were persecuting them. Their closeness to God, the depth of their relationships, their incredible courage, willing to be killed for following Jesus. If you whip them, they'd sing hymns. Starve them, they'd share what little they had with everyone else. Hate them, they'd love you back. Exclude them out, they'd invite you in. Kill them, and a hundred more would rise up to take their place. What are you going to do with people like that? You can't stop them.

It was just so beautiful that hundreds of thousands of people in Africa and Asia and Europe turned to Jesus because of their witness. Do we handle suffering differently? I mean, yes, we grieve, but we also have an underlying hope in God. Do we have purpose in our lives? Do we treat people who are different than we are with love and respect? Do we puzzle people in all the right ways? And the way we find the power to be a witness, the way we find a power to live this beautiful life is not by trying harder. It's not by trying harder.

We find the power to do this from two places. First, we need the Holy Spirit. Can't do it without him. So ask the Holy Spirit to guide you, nudge you, motivate you, empower you to live that beautiful life. And then second, remember everything that Jesus has done for you. The verses that come right before the one that I just read says this, "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession. In the original Greek, that phrase is literally costly treasure, costly purchase, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness and into his wonderful light.

What am I declaring? How sinful everyone else is? No, no, no, no, no. I am declaring how sinful I am, how I've hurt people, how I mess up, and yet I am still God's costly treasure, purchased at great price when God himself and the person of Jesus died on a cross to pay the just penalty for my sins so I could be set free and reconciled to God. And then he gives me the power to repent from those sins because Jesus calls sinners to repentance and begin to live a new life.

I declare what he's done for me. Jesus says, "You will be my witnesses." He doesn't say, "You'll be my sales team." He doesn't say, "You'll be my advertising agency." He doesn't say, "You'll be my defense attorney, jury, judge." No, witnesses. And in a courtroom, a witness's job is just to say, here's what I saw, here's what I heard, here's what happened. We witness to what Jesus has done in our lives and the lives of people we know. That in spite of all my sins and failures, he still says to you and to me, though the whole world is mine, you are my prized possession. Galaxies and oceans and mountains are nothing to me compared to you.

Which brings us to baptism. Baptism is about transformation. We go down under the water, our old self goes down under the water and we come up with a new heart ready to engage in a lifelong process of becoming like Jesus. Baptism is also a witness, that people see it when we're baptized, people see this and they know Jesus is doing something in our life. So it's transformation, it's about witness. And so today we're going to do that. If you've been baptized before, but you're at a new point in your spiritual life and you want to reaffirm your baptism as a way of saying to, I want the Holy Spirit more deeply in my life, and as a way of witnessing that you're at this place that Jesus is bringing you to a new place, you want to be more like Jesus, you can reaffirm your baptism today, either by sprinkling or immersion, whichever you want, either one. And if you've never been baptized, you can be baptized for the first time today as well.

In a minute, there's going to be some music. We're going to sing. Parents, when that happens, that's your cue to go get your elementary age kids where you dropped them off in S140, and then don't leave. Bring them back. Because we think kids seeing this is important for their spiritual growth. And today we have 32 people signed up to be baptized across all of our four services, as well as a few more in New Hope. 32 people. And plus a few more in New Hope, and all totaled, that means that in the last 13 months, we have baptized over 200 people in this church, which is just so cool.

And for those of you who have signed up, when the music starts, line up here on the sides of the room and all of that. Not yet because I'm still preaching, I have more to say. That's rude, that would be rude and it would disturb me. Unless you do it in the sanctuary, then I don't know. But not now. Not now, right? When the music starts, go to the side of the room if you signed up to be baptized. And if you have not signed up to be baptized, and right now the Holy Spirit is nudging you, you know who you are. Today's your day. You

can be baptized or reaffirm your baptism today as well, even if you didn't sign up. We have shirts, robes, towels. We are Presbyterian, prepared to be Pentecostal spontaneous. We'll just ask, is Jesus your Lord and Savior? And are you going to enter into a lifelong process of becoming like Him? You can say yes. Even if you did not sign up to be baptized, you can still come today and be baptized. And for those of us who are not being baptized, we're part of this too. We're part of this too. We get to worship, we get to celebrate, clap, pray for the people who are being baptized because this is what we do as a community. We celebrate and support people's spiritual growth.

I got an email recently from a woman in this church, I'll call Lori. And Lori said that years ago when she was just a young mom, she and her family were at a family reunion when the new wife of a cousin of hers who had met Lori for the first time that day took an immediate dislike to Lori. I'll pick it up in Lori's words. This is what Lori wrote to me. She said, "We were playing a board game and evidently my enthusiasm got on this woman's nerves. In front of our entire extended family, she launched a loud, vicious verbal attack that left me humiliated and distraught. I left in tears and for the following two weeks, tried without success to put it behind me. I became completely self-absorbed, her harsh words to me, running around and around my brain in an endless loop. Is what she said what everyone else thinks about me? How could I ever face these people again? Why would she want to hurt me like that?"

I prayed and prayed for God to release me, but my depression just continued. Well, one day I was praying and I got a thought that was certainly not mine. Invite her over for dinner. I knew that was God because that was the last thing I wanted to do. I resisted and I argued, but finally invited her to dinner, almost certain she wouldn't come anyway, so what's the harm? But this woman and her husband accepted and it was really awkward when they arrived, all smiles as though nothing had happened. And as I was preparing the meal, this woman sat at the kitchen table and we began to talk. And I asked her about her childhood, and suddenly words began pouring out of her. About her dad, who was a long distance truck driver and who was addicted to porn. About the innocent little girl who waited for her daddy to come home, only to have him practice on her the things he'd exposed himself to while on the road. About the pain and mental anguish that this had left her with.

And pal, my little cage of self-absorption exploded and I was on my knees with my arms around her holding her, weeping with her, praying God's healing over her. The eyes of my understanding were open. The former things had passed away and everything else became new. It wasn't about me, it was about God opening my heart and soul to how big and how deep and how wide is God's grace and love. And with that simple act of obedience, God gave me back more than I ever could ask or think. Not only was I healed, but I got to be an instrument in the process of Jesus beginning to heal another person. I woke up the following day with this song going through my head. Jesus breaks every chain, Jesus breaks every chain, Jesus breaks every chain and he sets me free."

Now, did Lori live a perfect life? No. By her own admission, she was mad, fearful, self-absorbed over what this woman had said to her. But when the Holy Spirit nudged her, Lori obeyed and wept and prayed and held this woman and prayed God's healing over her, and Jesus brought something beautiful out of so much pain. Lori was a witness. She showed who Jesus really is, and she told who Jesus really is because we need to do both. And Lori was transformed in that process to be more like Jesus, more of his hope, more of his courage, more of his love. It wasn't a perfect moment, but it was a beautiful moment, where Lori showed and told the goodness of Jesus.

And yes, when we do this, we might pay a cost, some kind of cost. It might mean giving up some money to be generous. It might mean giving up a grudge to be forgiving. Some people may mock us, make fun of us. It may cost us something because beautiful things are often costly things. Beautiful things are often costly things, but what we get in return is so much more. Closeness with Jesus, depth of relationships, meaning and purpose. See, the reward for living a beautiful life is you get to live a beautiful life that Jesus empowers. There is no one like Jesus. I have seen him heal marriages, break the chains of addiction, heal broken bodies, but I have also seen him shine through things that are not perfect at all. I have been at the bedside of people in their thirties dying of cancer far too young, and there's not going to be a happy ending the way that we think about it. And though they are grieving, they're also unafraid, and they experience Jesus' power and hope, and they're even excited that they get to be with him face to face.

I have seen victims of genocide reconcile with the perpetrators that killed their own family. And the memories of that pain will never fade this side of eternity, but they are free of the bitterness and the anger, and instead, feel Jesus' presence, hope, courage and love in a way that gives them joy. It's not perfect, but it is beautiful. There is no one like Jesus, who in spite of my anger, my lust, my judgmentalism, all my sin, you name it, died to make me his costly treasure. He loves me when I'm unlovable. He pursues me when I run away from him. He empowers me when I'm weak. He gives me courage when I'm afraid He sought me, bought me, healed me, transformed me, and has given me a bigger life than I ever would've given myself. He heals all things, restores all things, forgives all things. He makes all things new. There is no one like Jesus. There is no one like Jesus. Can I get a witness?

Yes.

So Jesus, as we come to baptize the people that have signed up, and Lord, as you may right now be nudging some people who did not sign up, but know that today is their day. Lord, as we come to baptism, we ask that as we do this, we would be reminded of your goodness, of the ways you've loved us, of the ways you have pursued us, of the ways that you have been there for us when we needed you. Lord, remind us of your goodness in such a way that it just fills us up and overflows and we can't help showing and telling all about you. Jesus, you are good all the time and all the time you are good. In your name. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Opening Question: Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- In your own words, what do you think the Apostle Peter's main point is in 1 Peter 2:1-12?
- In what ways are we aliens and foreigners (v. 11)? How does thinking of ourselves in this way alter how we live?
- Does it change your understanding of verse 12 to know that the word in the original Greek for "good" can also mean beautiful? If so how?
- What do verses 9-10 mean to you personally? Do you feel like God's treasured possession?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- What are some ways that you already have been or might be more intentional about living a beautiful life – not a perfect life – but a life that lets others see how Jesus has made or is making a beautiful thing of your life?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.