Testimony is…Edifying Memory Verse: Proverbs 27:17

Nov. 19th, 2023 Scripture Reading: Ephesians 4:11-16

 Over the past two weeks we have been discussing the nature of testimony. We saw how it can be terrifying to talk to someone about our faith and the power of God in our lives. Nobody wants to feel embarrassed or stupid, and religion is such a touchy subject…but how good it is for us to face that fear, jump off of that cliff and take the plunge! There is a thrill in the terror that actually unlocks a depth of joy that we could not otherwise know.

 Last week, Pastor Cassi showed us how testimony has an identifying effect. By sharing what God is up to in our lives we identify not only who God is; the master craftsman, the divine author of our lives, but we are also able to fully identify who we are; his children who magnify his glory and boast in his power. If we know who God is, then what follows is a clear understanding of who we are. And as Pastor Cassi reminded us, a non-fiction story is more powerful than something that is made up.

**SLIDE 2: edifying**

 So testimony is terrifying, identifying and toady we will see how it is edifying. Now edification is a great word, and it has a few dimensions of meaning. I think we commonly use the word as a form of building-up or encouragement. But there is a more specific meaning. To edify is to provide moral or intellectual instruction. It means, to teach. Testimony is a way in which we as a church can both teach and learn from one another.

 I think of it this way: years ago I ran cross country. I enjoyed spending the time outside and the feeling that I was doing something healthy. Running long distance was a good challenge for me both mentally and physically. But I was far from an athlete. Now I got my miles in and I did the work, but I was not an athlete in the sense that I was not driven to win. When our race days came around, I did my best and tried to push myself, but my only goal was to shave a few seconds of my best time. I would race myself, not the other competitors around me.

 But my teammate Sam, he was born to run. He was by far our fastest runner and every time he finished a race you got the sense that he could just keep going and going. Sam was an athlete. He wanted to win and he had the medals to prove it. Sam paid attention to the location our next race would be. He paid attention to the top runners at the schools we would be up against. Sam treated every practice run like it was a race. He carefully monitored his diet so he would be in tip-top shape. Sam did not just have the finish line in mind, but he set his sights on every person who was in front of him.

 Now as the lesser runner wanting to improve, I had a few options open to me. I could read a book about running….yes there are plenty out there. I could watch other people run and sort of learn that way, or I could talk to and train with someone like Sam. Which option would be most helpful? Reading a book is certainly one way to gain information, but running is an experience! It doesn’t help me to know about running…I have to do it! It involves mind and body. My best bet would be to learn from someone else who is experienced. By hearing testimony from Sam, from my coach, and running alongside them, I would experience the greatest education possible. It would be the most edifying scenario. I would be able to learn from the best. Sam would be able to testify to the truth of what running is, the truth of what it entails, the truth of what it would cost me. I would not be able to eat whatever I wanted. My diet would haver to change, my evenings would have to be spent differently. I would have to pay attention to how much sleep I was getting.

**SLIDE 3: When it comes to being a Christian, there are so many questions!**

 Is the Christian life any different? Don’t all of us need to be educated in what it means to be a Christian? Don’t we all need to be edified in how to follow Jesus? What does it look like? What will it cost us? What about this circumstance or that situation? How do we handle God’s word in a culture that does not acknowledge truth? How do I deal with temptation in my day to day? How do I pray? How do I better engage in worship? What am I supposed to do with these doubts I’m experiencing? When it comes to being a Christian, there are so many questions! There is so much I, as a single individual, don’t know. But I do know some things, and you know some things and if we are busy testifying to one another, demonstrating to one another and living life alongside one another, pretty soon church has an edifying effect. Pretty soon the old proverb becomes true. Proverbs 27:17 “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.”

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 Let me tell you, living life in this world has a dulling effect. There is so much noise and constant demand for our attention to dumb things; useless, meaningless; lifeless things, that we become deaf to the still small voice of God, we become numb to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. And even in those times when you are faithful to God and standing strong in his Word and you feel like he is using you in mighty ways, you can’t stay sharp alone. The more a pencil is used, the more it needs to be sharpened! The closer we draw to God, the more we need his church!

 The author of the book of Hebrews drives this home for us. In Hebrews 10, we hear this wonderful testimony of the new reality we get to experience thanks to Jesus. It says in verse 19, “Brothers and sisters, we have confidence that we can enter the holy of holies by means of Jesus’ blood, through a new and living way that he opened up for us through the curtain which is his body, and we have a great high priest over God’s house.”

**SLIDE 5: “Brothers and sisters, we have confidence that we can enter the holy of holies by means of Jesus’ blood, through a new and living way that he opened up for us through the curtain which is his body, and we have a great high priest over God’s house.”**

So most of that pertains specifically to the Jewish temple where God was worshipped. No one could enter into the holy of holies. It was a separate room closed off by a heavy curtain. Inside that room was the Ark of Testimony where the very presence of God lived. Remember, we discussed two weeks ago coming into the presence of a holy God is a terrifying thing because sin is not allowed to stand before a holy God, and you and I are sinful. We remember what happened to Uzzah when he reached out and touched the Ark of the Testimony. He was a decent man, a priest no less, and he died! Now that same ark was housed in the Holy of Holies.

Only the high priest could enter the holy of holies and that only happened once a year. But Hebrews is telling us that Christ has fulfilled all of these holiness requirements. He is the new high priest, and through his blood, we are able to enter through the curtain and be reconciled to God himself. What a wonderful testimony! And so what does that mean for us now? Keep reading.

**SLIDE 6: “Therefore, let’s draw near…” “…with a genuine heart with the certainty that our faith gives us, since our hearts are sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies are washed with pure water.” “Let’s hold on to the confession of our hope without wavering, because the one who made the promises is reliable. And let us consider each other carefully for the purpose of sparking love and good deeds…”**

Verse 22: “Therefore, let’s draw near…” So he is saying, the way to God is clear, so let’s go! Let’s make a run for it! “…with a genuine heart with the certainty that our faith gives us, since our hearts are sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies are washed with pure water.” So, just like running, we are talking mind and body here. God has redeemed both, he has claimed both. The text continues, “Let’s hold on to the confession of our hope without wavering, because the one who made the promises is reliable. And let us consider each other carefully for the purpose of sparking love and good deeds…” Consider each other, listen to each other, learn from each other, testify to each other, why? Because by doing so we spark love and good deeds! The CEB uses the word “spark” here, but the Greek term is *paroxusmos* and it carries a stronger sense of provocation in which one is literally jabbed or cut so that they must respond. The same term is used to describe the sharp disagreement Paul and Barnabus have in Act 15. There the CEB uses the phrase “intense argument.” So, “provoke” or “incite” is maybe a better word here than “spark”. But I think we can arrive at the same sense the author of Hebrews meant. It’s just like those days when you show up for cross country but you are just not feeling it. Maybe the weather is crummy and you have a soar knee. You would rather sit this on out. But your teammates are there and they remind you about your commitments, they point out how far you’ve come, they assure you that you can get through this challenge. They testify. They edify. They kick you in the butt and they don’t take no for an answer. And before you know it, you are in the middle of an eight-mile run, working hard and surviving. You know as well as I that there are weeks when we show up to church, we’re here, but sometimes we just don’t feel it. But because you showed up, because did not give up meeting, you find yourself surrounded by your church family, and they begin to provoke you a little bit, they edify you, they don’t take “no” for an answer and before you know it; that particular verse that was shared speaks directly to you; before you know it, that certain songs fill you with joy and peace; before you know it, you’re signed up as a volunteer for that upcoming church event; before you know it, your afternoon is spent helping others; before you know it, God has used you to shine the light of Christ. And it’s all because your teammates gave you the jab you needed.

**SLIDE 7: “Don’t stop meeting together with other believers, which some people have gotten into the habit of doing. Instead, encourage each other, especially as you see the day drawing near.”**

 Verse 25: “Don’t stop meeting together with other believers, which some people have gotten into the habit of doing. Instead, encourage each other, especially as you see the day drawing near.” Don’t stop meeting together, don’t stop attending church! It’s a bad habit! This world dulls our senses, and serving the Lord keeps us in constant need of sharpening. We do that here. We get sharp, we get encouraged, we edify all through the means of our testimony. Hebrews makes reference to the last day, the end of time, the return of Jesus. Now, it hasn’t happened yet and some would say it is foolish and naïve to expect it soon. The early Christians were mistaken right? They thought Jesus would come back in their lifetime. Well, clearly, they were wrong. But let me ask you this…do you think those Christians regretted living that way? Do you think they got to the end of their live and concluded, “Gee, I should have been less ready…I should have followed Jesus with less vigor”? Do you think their sense of urgency and purpose should have been dulled? No! They stayed sharp, they were ready. And even though we do not know that day or the hour of Christ’s return, it is certainly closer than it has ever been! So until that trumpet sounds, we gather together, we edify and testify and incite one another, we stay sharp!

**SLIDE 8: we stay sharp!**

 I wonder if you all who are here today might be willing to do a little provoking…Are there some folks, members of this church, or other friends who have fallen into the habit of not gathering? Are there those who we no longer see among us that maybe could use a little kick, a little jab, a phone call, a chat over coffee, a reminder of what they are missing when we gather in community to worship in the presence of a holy God. Maybe they need a testimony – a little edification. Is there someone you have in mind who should be here among us? Is there something you could do to reach out, to touch base, to provoke them to not give up gathering together. Jot their name down right now, remind yourself to make that call, issue that invitation, provoke that person to re-connect.

 The days we have left are fewer than they were yesterday. The world will continue to make us dull. We need each other’s encouragement. We need each other’s insight. We need each other’s testimonies. Stay sharp friends! Amen.