

# *Because Christians Are To Witness*

**WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY**

February 8, 2009

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*Isaiah 58:6-7 (NIV)*

<sup>6</sup>“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:  
to loose the chains of injustice  
and untie the cords of the yoke,  
to set the oppressed free  
and break every yoke?  
<sup>7</sup>Is it not to share your food with the hungry  
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—  
when you see the naked, to clothe him,  
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?”

*Luke 18:35-43 (NRSV)*

<sup>35</sup>As he [Jesus] approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging.  
<sup>36</sup>When he heard a crowd going by, he asked what was happening. <sup>37</sup>They told him, “Jesus of Nazareth is passing by.” <sup>38</sup>Then he shouted, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”  
<sup>39</sup>Those who were in front sternly ordered him to be quiet; but he shouted even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” <sup>40</sup>Jesus stood still and ordered the man to be brought to him; and when he came near, he asked him, <sup>41</sup>“What do you want me to do for you?” He said, “Lord, let me see again.” <sup>42</sup>Jesus said to him, “Receive your sight; your faith has saved you.” <sup>43</sup>Immediately he regained his sight and followed him, glorifying God; and all the people, when they saw it, praised God.

*1 Peter 2:9-12 (NRSV)*

<sup>9</sup>But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

<sup>10</sup>Once you were not a people,  
but now you are God’s people;  
once you had not received mercy,  
but now you have received mercy.

<sup>11</sup>Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. <sup>12</sup>Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.

*Following the example of John Wesley, United Methodists strive to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ in all that we say and do.*

What does the title of this study bring to mind? Perhaps “witness” means to you sitting down with someone to tell them about Jesus. Perhaps it is knocking on a few doors. Or being a bit kinder to the slow grocery clerk. Or even serving meals down at the Salvation Army.

In truth, all this and more is encompassed by the simple word “witnessing.” Everything that we say and do in relationship with others, even if our “relationship” is nothing more than a fleeting encounter. There is no moment when we are not a disciple of Christ. Today’s Scripture passages bring out this fully-dimensional understanding of Christian witness.

*God’s fast*

Fasting has a long and rich tradition in Christianity and other religions. John Wesley practiced fasting on a regular basis. I’ve tried it, though I’ve only gotten hungry. Still,

though I have not mastered fasting as a Christian discipline, I know that many Christians have found it to be a *means* of deepening and enriching their faith. However, it is easy for us to turn a *means* into an *end*. Hundreds of years before Jesus, Isaiah brings God's word that though fasting may be a valuable practice, it is not what God desires, it isn't the *end* that we ought to pursue. Rather, what God really wants is from us to "break the chains of injustice . . . to set the oppressed free . . . to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter."

If this sounds a lot like Jesus, it should. Jesus' teachings echo much of Isaiah and his actions are often the enactment of what Isaiah had promised God would do. It is this call to feed the poor and clothe the naked that drove much of John Wesley's ministry. The England of his day was an often brutal place, filled with the beyond-hope-poor and ravaged by cheap and often deadly alcohol. He preached among them and served them for decades.

### 1 Peter

Writing from Rome in the early 60's AD, Peter encourages the Christians in Asia Minor who "have had to suffer various trials" (1:6) and are living as "aliens and exiles" (2:11). He reminds them that they are "a chosen race, a holy nation, God's own people" called to "proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (2:9).

These Christians are not exiles in a literal sense; rather, as Achtemeier et al write, they are "people whose commitment to the lordship of Jesus Christ have led to transformed attitudes and behaviors that place them on the margins of respectable society. They have become victims of social ostracism, their allegiance to Christ having won for them slander, animosity, reproach, scorn, vilification, and contempt."<sup>1</sup>

As difficult as such ostracism might be in our world, it was much more powerful in the NT world, a social world driven by status and community. In the face of these trials, Peter urges Christians to "rejoice insofar as you are sharing in Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed" (4:13). . . Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but on the contrary, repay with a blessing (3:9). Surely, Peter is calling them to be people of faith, vision, and courage – to be a witness, despite their ostracism and sufferings.

1. Achtemeier, P.J., Green, J.B., & Thompson, M.M. 2001. *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology*.

The United Methodist Church (UMC) remains strongly committed to social justice and to providing for all those in need. Being a diverse church, we may disagree about the *means* to those *ends*. But we know that pursuit of those ends is an enduring witness to the power of God's Good News.

*"They saw it and praised God"*

Jesus' trip to Jerusalem that would end with him on a cross, took him through Jericho, a town about eight miles northeast of Jerusalem. As Jesus passed through town, a blind man in the crowd managed to attract Jesus' attention. When Jesus asked the man what he wanted, his reply was "Lord, let me see again." And the man was healed, enabled to see.

What do you suppose was the crowd's reaction to all this? Well . . . it was pretty much what you'd expect. They were amazed and went around telling everyone what they had seen, praising and proclaiming God the whole time.

Jesus' healing of the blind man was both an act of compassion and an enactment of God's kingdom, in which there are no blind, or lame, or ill, or grieving. But Jesus' healing was still more – it was a powerful *witness* to the power of God.

*A People Who Proclaim*

In our passage from 1 Peter, he writes to Christians who feel like aliens and exiles in their own lands. Echoing God's word brought by Moses, Peter encourages them by reminding them of their place among

God's people. Like the ancient Israelites, these Christians *are* a "royal priesthood" and a "holy nation" upon whom worldly power and holy purpose converge. They have been called out of the darkness for a reason, a purpose. Peter states this purpose simply. Why has God formed us into his people? So that we may "proclaim God's mighty acts." This is the *end* to which we have been called. So that we might proclaim to others, in what we say and what we do, God's mighty acts of salvation. Note that God doesn't place on us the responsibility of "saving souls" or building his kingdom. That is his work. We are simply to proclaim.

*Now . . .* lest we think this proclaiming is all about speech, remember what I'm sure your Mom told you: actions speak louder than words. And if no one told you, you've discovered it for yourself. What we do in our interactions with others is a witness to Christ, especially if the person knows that we are a self-professed Christian. We might wish that the practice of our faith weren't always on display, but that is just how it is. Thus, Peter is right when he tells the Christians, "Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds . . ."

And what kind of people does it take to proclaim God's mighty acts . . . to handle this convergence of worldly power and holy purpose . . . to build *for* God's kingdom?

Only a few verses before today's passage, Peter tells the Christians that they are to rid themselves of all malice and pretense, envy and hurtful talk. Like babies at their mothers' breasts, these Christians are to drink the milk of God's kindness so that they might grow to maturity and wholeness, having received a foretaste of God's full mercy. Peter urges them to be like "living stones" built into a spiritual house, a house of strength that rests upon Jesus Christ, the cornerstone and foundation of this house. Peter writes, "Therefore, prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you . . . love one another deeply

#### Head . . . Heart . . . Hands

John Wesley's solidarity with the poor had always distinguished his ministry and threatened his reputation among the "respectable" folks. One of Wesley's regrets in his old age was that he himself had become "respectable" among the upper circles of London society.

But John knew that we are called to serve – to feed, to clothe, and to care (see Matt. 25:31-46). If that means we are viewed as odd or disreputable by the world, then so be it. Christianity is not just about what we believe or what we feel, but also what we do – the head, the heart, and the hands.

Wesley's commitment to bring the Good News and a warm meal to society's outcasts still permeates the UMC. We remain committed to social justice. We understand that we are not just to wait for the full realization of God's kingdom; we are to work toward it – every day and in every way and for all persons.

from the heart" (1:13,22). Later in the letter Peter writes, "Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received . . . whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies . . ." (4:10-11).

In much of his letter, Peter paints a picture of a people, God's people, who can do the work of the kingdom, who can "proclaim God's mighty acts." Christians are to be unified and disciplined. We are to love one another. We are to serve one another. Peter reminds us that we are to be agreeable, sympathetic, and humble. We are not to retaliate when wronged.

When we live in this way, when we take care of those in need, when we boldly tell others the Good News . . . in all this, we are witnesses to God's grace and the saving power of the gospel. As United Methodists, we earnestly seek to tell the Good News, to bear the fruit of God's Spirit every day, and to care for all those who need help with even the basics of life.

This is why we are United Methodists.

## Denominations and the Methodist “Middle Way”

I used to be troubled by all the denominations that make up the body of Christ. Aren't we supposed to be one body? But I am no longer. In his various letters to churches, Paul often talks about the diversity among God's people. Some of us are given gifts of caring or leadership. Others are gifted teachers or leaders. None of these gifts are superior to the others; all are needed in God's household (see 1 Cor 12:4-31 for example). God's family is strengthened, not weakened, by the diversity of these individual gifts. I've come to see denominations in much the same way. Christ's church is strengthened by the Roman Catholic emphasis on tradition and the Baptist commitment to evangelism. All Christians can learn a lot about the reality and power of the Holy Spirit from the Pentecostals and the Eastern Orthodox. The Presbyterians and Reformed remind us all of the importance of the Christian mind. Within this diversity, we seek unity in the essentials of our Christian proclamation while respecting, and using, our differences. It is in the seeking after unity that we United Methodists make our own distinctive contributions.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was born the son of an Anglican (Church of England) minister and died as an Anglican minister himself. Methodism was birthed in the Church of England. When the storms of the Protestant reformation swept across Europe, the English struggled to reconcile two polarized groups. On the one hand, there were those who wanted to stay part of the Roman Catholic church. On the other hand, there were groups like the Puritans who wanted to restore what they referred to as “primitive Christianity.” The leaders of the Church of England sought to find a “middle way.” This seeking after the center underlies the Anglican and the United Methodist churches to this day.

I couldn't count how many “mixed” marriages I've met in Methodist churches. You know what I mean – one spouse raised Roman Catholic and the other Southern Baptist! It seems that Methodist churches have enough liturgy and tradition to speak to the Catholic but enough revivalism to speak to the Baptist. This commitment to the “middle way,” or as Scott Jones (A UMC Bishop) puts it, “the extreme center,” is reflected in our theology as well as in our practices. United Methodists affirm that the Bible is the “primary criterion of Christian doctrine,” but we remember that our traditions, our intellect, and our experience all help to shape our understanding under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We try hard to avoid simplistic “bumper-stick” interpretations and passing fads. We are committed to unity in the essentials of our faith, but remember that there is much that Christians can disagree about. As Wesley put it, “we think and let think.”

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. How does the word “witnessing” strike you? Have you tended to think of it as mostly what you say? Do you agree that witnessing to Christ encompasses all that we say or do? How would you feel if the statement, “I am a Christian,” were stenciled on your forehead? How might it change your activities or your interactions with others? Do you see the problem that arises if you think that the stencil would necessitate big changes in your life? How could we come to live as if the stencil were always there?
2. In his commentary on 1 Peter, David Bartlett writes, “First Peter 2:1-10 reminds us that difference between Christians and non-Christians is not that we see different things but that we see the same things differently.” What do you think he means? What sort of persons can see things differently? Bartlett writes that the difference between the two ways is faith. How does our faith in Jesus Christ shape our way of seeing? How does our faith help to shape us into the people of love, joy, discipline, humility, and courage that Peter urges Christians to be?
3. We've been learning about Methodism for a few weeks. It is a good time to reflect on our own experiences with Methodism. Here are a few questions to think about or discuss with others:
  - How did you come to faith in Jesus Christ? Has it been a lifelong process for you or can you identify a moment or a period in your life when you were consciously changed?
  - Why are you a United Methodist? What attracted you to United Methodism? What disturbs you about Methodism?
  - Why are you at St. Andrew? Did you choose St. Andrew from among the many UMC churches in our area or did St. Andrew bring you to Methodism?

## Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Monday, Isaiah 58</b> The entire chapter on genuine fasting</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, Isaiah 59:1-8</b> Why do prayers and fasting have no effect? Not because of God, but because of the people's violence and social injustice.</p>
<p><b>Wednesday, Matthew 25:31-46</b> The parable of the sheep and the goats. A story of the final judgment.</p>	<p><b>Thursday, 1 Corinthians 14:20-33</b> Paul cautions the Corinthians about their conduct of worship and its effect on outsiders/unbelievers.</p>
<p><b>Friday, 1 Peter 2:11-3:20</b> A long passage about how the Christians are to live in the larger society. Notice the emphasis on how their conduct can lead others to Christ . . . and bear in mind that Peter is writing from and for a first-century audience, not a 21st century. His overall message would be the same today, but the particulars would be different.</p>	<p><b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b></p>

