

SERMON TITLE: "What's It Mean to Be a United Methodist? Witness"
SERMON TEXT: Acts 10:34-48
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: October 8, 2023, at First United Methodist Church

INTRODUCTION

A couple weeks ago, I began my sermon by telling you that I like to watch detective programs on TV. In those crime dramas, the detectives use all kinds of methods to determine the identity of the victim and the most likely suspect. But all of us who are fans of the *Law & Order* franchise know that the detective work is only the first part of our justice system. The second part shifts to the lawyers and courtroom. There, attorneys battle it out to see who can present the best case through witness testimonies. It's those witnesses who will determine whether the accused is officially identified as innocent or guilty.

Over the past four weeks, I've been talking to you about what it means to be identified as a United Methodist. Whenever someone joins a United Methodist church, they vow to uphold that congregation with their prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. In other words, we promise to be engaged spiritually, to show up and participate, to support the ministries financially, and to serve God and others with the talents and skills we have received from the Holy Spirit. Those are the first four. Today we're ready for that last one. So I invite you to take a look at Acts 10:34-48 with me and see if we can answer the question, "What does it mean to be a United Methodist witness?"

1—SAYS, "JESUS CHRIST IS LORD OF ALL"

The first thing we see in these verses is that a United Methodist witness says, "Jesus Christ is Lord of all." The Apostle Peter was the one speaking here. He was Jewish, but he was addressing a bunch of Romans who were gathered in the house of Cornelius, a Roman military leader. This incident took place in Caesarea, a Palestinian city which had been taken over by the Romans and named after Caesar—the king, or emperor, of the vast Roman empire. The various Caesars were powerful guys, who

wanted everyone to think of them as gods. *Divine, all supreme*, and *Lord* were all concepts associated with the Roman emperors. And, yet, it was in that context that Peter spoke boldly the words we see in verse 36: “Jesus Christ is Lord of all.”

Peter was challenging the political power of his day by establishing someone else who was more worthy of allegiance and devotion. Peter was denying the divinity of Caesar and exalting Jesus Christ in his place. Such a pronouncement was amazing on a couple of fronts. It was amazing for Peter to even be talking with the Roman gentiles because his Jewish upbringing severely limited those with whom he could associate. In the earlier verses of Acts chapter 10, you can see how hard God had to work to persuade Peter it was OK even to step foot inside Cornelius’ house. And then, after he got there, for Peter to be brave enough to tell those Roman soldier-types that their exalted Caesar wasn’t the ultimate one they thought—that there was someone else, instead, to whom they owed their loyalty and patriotism—wow! It’s no wonder that, in the original Greek language of the New Testament, they used the same word for *witness* and *martyr*. To speak like that could get you killed.

But Peter knew what he had to do and what he had to say. As Peter’s fellow apostle Paul wrote in *his* letter to the Christians at Rome, we need to confess with our lips that Jesus Christ is Lord, not only for our own salvation, but so others can hear the good news as well. “How are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard?” asked Paul. “And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?” (Romans 10:9-14).

One time I heard a radio interview of two musicians. I chuckled when I heard them say that they grew up in a part of the United States “where Elvis was king, and Jesus was Lord.” Well, for us United Methodists, Jesus needs to be both our king and our Lord. We need to allow him to rule in our hearts and our behaviors. We need to allow him to shape not only our spiritual thoughts and practices, but also the way we live in our society. And we need to willingly speak about how important Jesus is in our lives. To be a United Methodist witness, we need to say, “Jesus Christ is Lord of all.”

2—KNOW AND TELL THE BASICS OF FAITH

Acts 10 gives us a second idea of what it means to be a United Methodist witness. We need to know and tell the basics of faith. We see this in verses 37 through 43, where Peter was laying it out to the Gentiles gathered at Cornelius' house. Jesus' ministry began after his baptism by John and then spread throughout Judea. God anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit and power, so that Jesus was able to heal those who were oppressed. Then Jesus was put to death on a tree, and God raised him on the third day. Afterward, Jesus appeared to many people, eating and drinking with some, and instructing them to testify that he was (and is) the judge of the living and dead.

This little summary given by Peter was an early church creed, very close to what later became known as the Apostles' Creed. The earliest Christians used creeds to help the believers learn the basic doctrines of Christian faith. They didn't have New Testaments back then that they could turn to chapter and verse, so they needed simple creedal statements that they could memorize. Hymns worked the same way. If they could sing it, they could remember it. Kind of like memorizing times tables helps you do math problems, if you knew your creeds and hymns, you would know what you believed and you would be able to share that knowledge easily with other people.

We United Methodists tend not to use creeds as much in our worship services as some other denominations, but we do love our hymns. And we try to teach the basics well in our Christian education classes. That includes our weekly classes like Sunday School, and our occasional classes like I offer for new members. One time I had a conversation with a woman who attended our church but hadn't yet joined our congregation. She told me one of the reasons why she hadn't yet become a member is that she didn't think she knew enough about United Methodist beliefs. She didn't want to get caught in the embarrassing position of not having an answer for someone who might say to her, "So, you're a United Methodist. What do United Methodists believe?" I told her that I could help with that if she would come to a new member orientation class. There we would go over the basic beliefs and

structures that shape who we are as United Methodists. Obviously, if we're going to be a United Methodist witness, we need to know and be able to tell the basics of faith.

3—HAVE A SPIRITUAL GROWING EDGE

But our United Methodist witness isn't just about saying, "Jesus is Lord," and being able to list some basic Christian beliefs. I guess one of the reasons we United Methodists don't recite creeds every Sunday in worship is that we don't want to get stuck in a black-and-white fundamentalist position. We don't want to smugly think that we've got this all figured out. In the tradition of John Wesley, United Methodists are a people who are constantly "going on to perfection." That means we're always striving to understand more and do better. It's great to look back on the day of our salvation and be able to testify with assurance in our hearts that we have been forgiven by God. But we should never be satisfied with what happened in the past. We should always have a spiritual growing edge. We should have a place where God is working on us and challenging us today—where we feel spiritually engaged and alive.

In Acts 10, for Peter, the spiritual growing edge was coming to the recognition that God accepted Gentile believers. Salvation wasn't limited to just those of Jewish descent and traditions. Christian faith was for everyone! Astounding as it seemed to Jewish folks, even uncircumcised Romans could believe in Jesus and receive the Holy Spirit! It's hard for us today to realize how radical that was for Peter and the earliest Jewish Christians. God was definitely pushing them out of their God's-chosen-people nationalistic comfort zone and teaching them that the basics of faith they had learned as Jewish children needed some updating in the new multi-cultural world in which they lived.

Today, we also need to be engaged in our own faith development, moving on to perfection, and working on our spiritual growing edge. While there are some unfailing truths—like "Jesus loves me, this I know"—that we can hang on to through thick and thin, we really don't learn everything we need to know in kindergarten Sunday School. If that's all we've got and just keep repeating that week after week through the rest of our lives, our faith is going to get pretty stale. Inevitably, our immature faith will fail

to provide effective answers, comfort, strength, and courage for the challenges we'll encounter. And our witness in those times will be sorely lacking, as I doubt very many people will be interested in what we have to say.

Have you noticed that the times when people are most open to talking about religion are when something bad is happening? And have you noticed that those difficult times are precisely when black-and-white pat answers don't seem sufficient? Have you also noticed that those are the times when you have the most trouble talking about what you believe?

That's why we United Methodists need to be in regular Bible study and on-going faith development. What *do* we believe when bad things happen to good people, and where *is* God when we are suffering in pain? How *do* we Christians engage with contentious and difficult issues like gender, sexuality, and reproduction; political instability and violence; climate change and immigration? Times change, people change, circumstances change, and our faith needs to adapt and grow, or we'll wake up one day and realize that our faith isn't adequate for the problems we face. Consequently, our witness will be irrelevant at best, and possibly even repulsive to those around us. Acts 10 teaches us that, if we want to have a Christian witness that is attractive, dynamic, and strong, then we need to have a spiritual growing edge.

CONCLUSION

To conclude this sermon, I want to leave you with my own paraphrase of a Bible verse that comes from First Peter 3:15. No matter what happens, he wrote, be ready to explain what and why you believe. In our behaviors, our attitudes, and our words, every United Methodist is called to be a faithful and effective Christian witness.