

**Getting in Shape for Christmas (2): Work Out Your Witness**  
**A Sermon by Louise Westfall**  
**Fairmount Presbyterian Church**  
**Cleveland Heights, Ohio**  
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**Text: John 1:6-8, 19-28**

Okay, everybody ready? We're getting in shape for Christmas, and worship is the perfect time for a vigorous spiritual work out. Ready. . . .set. . . .

Oh wait. What, exactly, are we working out?? We know that spiritual fitness, like physical fitness, requires regular exercise, sustained activity that pushes the envelope at least a little to improve health and stamina. But how do we proceed? Of course we Presbyterians of the Reformed theological tradition understand the Bible to be the unique and authoritative guide for faith and action. We've got the book on that! But I wonder if it doesn't intimidate us at times—not unlike walking into a health club for the first time, seeing the gleaming array of weight and fitness machines, all state-of-the-art, all undoubtedly beneficial. . . .and we have only the vaguest notion on how to get started.

In the morning gospel text we encounter a personal trainer of sorts, John the Baptist. Last week we focused on his assessment of our spiritual health and our need to make some changes. This week he points us in the right direction, by witnessing to what he has come to believe as the truth. Listen for God's Word to the church in the reading from the gospel according to John in the first chapter, verses six through eight, and then verses nineteen through twenty-eight.

[JOHN 1:6-8, 19-28]

*Can I get a witness?* This question, often voiced as part of the call and response cadence characteristic of Black preaching, is an invitation to share the varied experiences of the congregation, to testify to the truth of God's love as it has come to be known, personally and individually. Yet to be a witness is to "go public," to speak openly to others of what one

understands as true and reliable. *Can I get a witness?* The Scripture text identifies John as a “witness,” whose purpose is to give testimony to the true light that was coming to enlighten the world. He gives that witness before all the people, even the religious leader who immediately challenge him. But he isn’t silenced. He testifies to what he’s come to understand. The bulk of that testimony appears to consist of who he is *not*, and we might think he goes overboard to do that. Yet John makes it clear: I’m not the one to whom you attach all those exalted titles. I’m here to point the way to the one who is already among you. It’s not about “me,” but about the One who will bring light and life to all. In one brief, telling phrase—“I’m not worthy to untie his sandal”---he describes a relationship of humility in which he can only kneel before Jesus as a servant would.

Can I get a witness? Friends, in the superb example of John the Church hears its calling to be a witness today; to testify to the light that has entered our world darkened by warfare, greed, hurt, and hungry for healing and hope. Through our life together, in our worship, in our mission, with our words, we are to tell the story, to give expression in our time and place—our context---to the meaning of Jesus’ advent and the Realm of justice and peace he came to establish. How equipped are you and I for this calling?

Sometimes I wonder if we don’t share the good news of God’s grace out of a sense of inadequacy. We don’t know the Bible; we don’t “think theologically” --and oh by the way, that’s why we have professional clergy (let them speak for us). Or perhaps we’ve relinquished the role of witness because we’re afraid of offending others who might see it differently, or because we’re afraid we’ll come across as too dogmatic, too judgmental, too intolerant. Or we just don’t want to seem too “religious.” There are lots of reason to keep silent.

The trouble is, in so doing, we have lost our distinctive voice and the ability to articulate it graciously and joyfully and effectively in a world in which messages of intolerance and

narrowly-defined religion dominate all too often. The world needs a witness to the God whose love welcomes and changes us for good. Individuals need that witness; so does our nation. The alleged “selling” of the Illinois Senate seat—and other examples of corruption in public life—illustrate a moral compass gone askew that needs realignment. A witness to what is true and excellent and right. On both a deeply personal level and as a community, the witness of the church can serve as a guide to persons who feel at sea, and communities that appear unanchored. We can do so without arrogance or a sense of superiority that ours is the only truth perspective. But the light needs a witness—someone with the courage to stand up and say: “Look! Over there! Can you see what I see?” [William Willimon makes this point in his article “Witness” from *Pulpit Resource*, Vol 36, No. 4, December 2008] There are, after all, many ways to get to the train station. But if you’re lost, learning just one good way will work! Can I get a witness?

I wonder too if part of our hesitancy to testify is because of our own uncertainty, our own yearning for the light to break through in our lives, in our city, in the world. We can’t witness to our doubts, can we?? The questions quieted only by getting back to work or filling our days with endless activity? How can I be a witness if my own faith is shaky?

So that’s why we need to “work out” our witness—to reclaim our voice and strengthen our telling of the old, old story in a new, new day. John, our personal trainer, points the way by reminding us that the light is already here, among us, but unrecognized by us. I love that clue: *Among you stands one whom you do not know*. And isn’t that the way it often is? The Holy One is quietly present and just waiting to be discovered for the first time—or the four hundredth time--in the witness of Scripture, in the prayers, in the music, in some new enterprise undertaken in Christ's name, in the faces of the beloved friends gathered right here. And then let’s practice working it out in our every day lives! It’s not easy; words of witness may not be our first language, or the one we’re most comfortable

with. As Presbyterians, we appreciate the creeds and statements of belief the church has developed across the span of its history to witness to our faith. We teach them to our children in the confirmation process, because we want them to claim those roots; to know something of their family tree. We affirm our place in this history, even though we may not hold to every tenet of those creeds. Most of them are written in the idiom of another time, not ours. So I want to propose a workout routine we can try this morning that can help us witness to our faith today, in the language we use every day. I'm going to say a number of incomplete sentences—some images and metaphors for Jesus---and I invite you to scribble down on your bulletin some words that complete one or more of those sentences for you. It isn't a test; there are no grades and I won't be collecting your papers. No one will see what you write but you. So here goes:

Jesus is like light because. . . . .

Jesus is like a Global Positioning System [GPS] because. . . .

Jesus is like a homeless shelter because . . . . .

Jesus makes a difference to me because. . . . .

That's the first part of the work out. But remember how we said witnessing is a public act? At coffee hour today, I invite you to give a witness: to talk with one other person about one of your responses. Listen to their testimony too. Your conversation will help you practice your faith witness; it may feel awkward, but as with every work out routine, it only gets smoother the more you do it!

You witness more than you may be aware. This past Monday I had what I hope will be my final chemotherapy treatment. The side effects experienced for the week following make them dreaded, particularly in this busy season. I felt anxious and fearful. But I had also made a commitment to read the devotional booklet prepared by our Faith Formation Council, with daily meditations by Fairmounters. While waiting to go to the hospital, I opened to the day's devotion. Theme: peace. Hmmmm. Scripture: *Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her*

*warfare is ended. . . . See, the Lord God comes with might. . . . He will lead his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and gently lead the mother sheep.* The meditation writer noted that she was always trying to wrest control of her “flock” but wanted instead to remember to be led by God, cared for as one of His flock. She wrote, “The emotional capital we expend riding the rollercoaster of our lives can become more leveled, more peaceful, if we listen for the voice of the Lord, which has spoken. . . . Peace is living unencumbered with a full sense of joy. Lift up your hearts! God is great!” Now this meditation writer is not a monk far removed from the pain and ambiguity of life. She’s the mother of teenagers for heaven’s sake! With a husband and demanding career and as an active volunteer. I’m sure there are days when she forgets to listen to the voice of the Lord. But see, you don’t have to have it all perfect in order to be God’s witness. And on the day when I needed it most, I got a witness to the loving care and peaceful presence of the faithful Shepherd.

Friends, long lay the world in sin and error pining. Oh, it’s not without our trying to make things better. But what we could not do for ourselves, God did for us. The true light, which enlightens everyone, has come into the world. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never overcome it. There was a church sent from God, whose name was Fairmount. The church came to testify to that light. Can we get a witness?

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The affirmation of faith today is from the most recent the Presbyterian Church has developed. I invite us to read it through silently first, and then rise as able, raise our right hands, and swear to tell the truth, or at least as much as we’ve received. Thanks be to God! [AFFIRMATION OF FAITH]

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