

Witness Boldly

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Acts 5:27-42

Sermon Series:
God's Big Story

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What a joy to gather this beautiful morning, the first official day of summer and Father's Day and Hawaiian shirt day all rolled into one. The fifth of the Ten Commandments says, "Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you" (Exodus 20:12). Of course, we recognize there is an asterisk by Father's Day because, much like Mother's Day, some of us are grieving for a missing parent, some of us want to be parents and it has not happened, and others are parents who had other plans. And, of course, there is the potential of a wonderful and/or difficult parent-child relationship. Life is complex. Nevertheless, this day is appropriate to honor our fathers and the fathers of our children.

After tucking his three-year-old child Sammy in for bed one night, his father heard sobbing coming from his room. Rushing back in, he found Sammy crying hysterically. He managed to tell his dad that he had swallowed a penny, and he was sure he was going to die. No amount of talking was helping. His father, in an attempt to calm him down, palmed a penny from his pocket and pretended to pull it from Sammy's ear. Sammy was delighted. In a flash, he snatched it from his father's hand,

swallowed, and then cheerfully demanded, "Do it again, Dad!" Ah, the joy of parenting!

The portion of the Book of Acts that we are studying right now is really a story of ordinary people filled with God's spirit and bearing witness to the reality of Jesus to everyone they knew, and two things happened. A whole lot of people responded and became Jesus' followers. And the religious authorities became very jealous of the growing number of Jesus followers. Last week, Pastor Pete spoke about Holy Boldness, which he said is not pushy, nervy, brutal or sassy but is conviction plus courage plus transparency. If talking about your faith, that's bearing witness to Jesus, makes you a little nervous, having holy boldness is to set your anxiety aside, to take courage, speak of your convictions about God to other people while being transparent about trusting God in the ups and downs of your real life. Now, my question to every parent this Father's Day is this: do you show a holy boldness in talking to your children about your faith? Do you have a vision for the spiritual lives of your children regardless of their present ages?

My friend Reid Carpenter tells of a time his son "...went to China to teach English at the Institute for Science Technology Management in Shanghai." Reid says, "I had the chance to go over to see him in

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China and to visit his classroom. All the students in his classroom were Ph.D.s between the ages of thirty-five and fifty-five. What I wasn't ready for was when my son, twenty-two-years-old, walked into the class, everyone in the class stood up and bowed three times, saying, 'Good Morning, Mr. Scott, teacher. Good Morning, Mr. Scott, teacher, Good Morning, Mr. Scott, teacher.' When I was introduced as Mr. Scott teacher's father, they bowed so low I figured they were going to hit their heads on the floor.

"My son said, 'You can ask my father anything you want.' A woman in the back of the room raised her hand. Without flinching, she said, 'Mr. Scott teacher's father, what is your vision for your son?' and sat down. Do you know what I did," said Reid? "I asked her to repeat the question! I hesitated, because my son was sitting right in front of me. I looked into the face of my son and I said, 'Scott, here we are in China. You know I love you, but I know I never looked into your face and told you what I believe about you, or what you can do, or what you can be –I have never really told you what my vision is for you.'

"I just want you to know that I filibustered while I tried to put my thoughts into words and all of a sudden my son was up on his feet, and he had tears coming down his face, and tears were coming down my face. All of a sudden, we were bobbing and weaving across that room. We were in each other's arms, and the whole Chinese class

stood up and cheered us on and gave us a standing ovation. They didn't understand a word we said—but one thing they knew was that a father and a son had connected at a level that they knew was holy."

Reid concludes: "There is no one you couldn't go up to—any person, your own child, parent, fellow worker, and look that person in the eye, affirm to them once and for all, 'I believe in you. I don't care what you have done—I don't care what happened—I believe in you—and I am going to stand with you no matter what'"— offering a vision for the wellbeing of the other person. One of the things about Bill Cornelius, whose life we will celebrate tomorrow morning, is that he and his wife, Julia, had a very clear, very loving vision for their daughter, Melanie, and everyone who knew him knew that. And, of course, you also know that Jesus Christ has a vision for you, a vision he has grasped you for. A vision that, although life will have its ups and downs, is a vision that is filled with positive thoughts about you and offers you a future and a hope. Jesus looks you in the eye and calls you to rely utterly on him.

Reid Carpenter was asked, "What is your vision for your son?" Do you have vision for your children? Or your grandchildren? Or other children in your life? I don't mean a vision like "I want my child to be a butcher, a baker or a candlestick maker," but a vision for their character, their integrity, their fortitude, their wisdom and their courage and, above all, a vision for their faith, a faith rooted in knowing the person

Jesus who will help them today and give them hope for eternal life tomorrow.

of Jesus. It is so life-affirming for a dad or a mom or any adult to look a child in the eye and say, "Look, I don't know if I have ever told you this, but I tell you now, I love you, and I believe in you, and I've got a vision for you and for the faith that will sustain you and I want to talk to you about it." The deepest and most loving vision a parent may have for a child is that the child comes to know personally and depend utterly on the person of Jesus for strength and guidance in this life and the promise and assurance of eternal life to come.

Now, I know that when I'm talking about talking about God and Jesus to our children that some of you may think to yourselves, Well, Stan does it because he is a pastor! Let me tell you that's not even close to the real reason. Consider this robe I am wearing. First of all, it is not a priestly garment. It does not mean that I have a special relationship with God that you don't have. As a matter of fact, the Bible teaches that every one of us has a special relationship with God through believing in Jesus, what the Bible calls the priesthood of all believers. So what is the purpose of a robe? This robe is an academic gown. It symbolizes that the pastor has been educated in the preaching of the Word of God. In fact, you can read an academic gown. The blue velvet and blue threads represent my field of study, which is education. The three stripes on the sleeves refer to the degree granted. The colors on the back of the hood around my

neck are the colors of the university that granted the degree. In this case, the black and gold of Purdue University. Sometimes you will see pastors wear an additional cloth, a stole, around their neck which is a symbol of the office of the ministry of Word and Sacrament.

Guess what? I know this may surprise some of you but when I go home I don't wear a robe! Today, as I take this robe off, I am wearing a Hawaiian shirt like other dads because, to me, my children are not and never will be "Preacher's Kids." They are just my kids, Stan's kids, Ann Marie's kids, whom we love more than our next breath. When I talk to my kids about faith, it is not because of my job but because of my Jesus. Jesus who loves me and who has shown grace to me when we both knew I didn't deserve it. My Jesus who helps me today and gives me hope for eternal life tomorrow. The Jesus I want my children to know because long after I am gone my Jesus, who is now also their Jesus, will love them and show grace to them when they don't deserve it. Jesus who will help them today and give them hope for eternal life tomorrow. When I talk to my children about faith and when you talk to your children about faith, it's because you want them to know the Jesus who loves you and who will love and sustain them.

Now, some parents say things like, "I leave my children's choice of religious path completely up to them," as if that were somehow a cultured position. It's really just a cop out. Of course the child will make his or her own ultimate

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decision about whether to embrace God and Jesus. However, when Moses gave the Ten Commandments, he said, “⁴Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. ⁵You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. [And notice this:] ⁷Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise” (Deuteronomy 6:4-7). We are encouraged, even commanded, to bear witness to our children of what we believe. If they are receptive, they meet the God who loves them, and if they are not receptive, we do not force our faith upon them but we pray for them that God will lead them to Him.

There are two basic reasons parents don’t talk to their children about what they believe. First, they aren’t sure what to say. Perhaps you are not clear about your own faith. If your children’s faith is important to you, then clarify your own faith and do it now. Anna Whiston-Donaldson, who manages Grapevine Books, our VPC bookstore, has a table set up just outside the sanctuary with three books: *Know What You Believe* and *Know Why You Believe* by Paul Little, and *A Parent’s Guide to the Spiritual Growth of Children*.

The second reason parents don’t talk to their children about what they believe is anxiety—not sure how the child will react—perhaps nervous to speak about

something as personal as faith. In our text this morning, we saw that the reaction of the religious authorities to the apostles talking about Jesus was jealousy, and they beat the apostles. What was the apostle’s reaction to the beating? Give up bearing witness? Not at all! They felt honored to suffer for Jesus, and they showed even more holy boldness. Mom and dad, you aren’t going to be thrown in jail or beaten, as you would be in some places, for talking about your Jesus to your children. Take courage and talk to your children today! If they are open to our Lord, it is a wonderful blessing. If they are uncertain or not interested, we never push our faith upon them but continue to pray daily for them, speaking warmly about Jesus and faith when the moment is right.

When our kids were little, I used to have my devotional Quiet Time in the downstairs bathroom of a tri-level home. It was the only quiet place in the whole house. Still, I’d just settle down and start praying or reading the Bible and three-year-old Lindsay would pound on the door, “Let’s play, Dad.” “Go away,” I’d say. “I’m being spiritual!” I mentioned this to a friend one day who said, “Stan you are missing a great with-me opportunity as a parent. Invite Lindsay to join you!” He was so right. I can’t believe I didn’t think of it. The next time she pounded on the door I said, “Daddy is praying honey. You are welcome to pray with me or I will play later.” Of course she came right in and climbed into my lap.

What greater gift could you give them than the One who will be with them for the rest of their lives and welcome them into his heavenly home?

Well, I had to change my prayers a bit and said, “Lord, please help Ellen know Jesus as her friend. Please help Kristy know Jesus as her friend,” and then I paused, thinking of other friends of Lindsay’s to pray for and she said, “And Lindsay.” And Lindsay? “Do you want Jesus to be your friend?” “Yes, Dad.” “Do you know how to have Jesus as your friend?” “No, Dad.” “Just ask Him into your heart. Would you like me to pray and you pray with me to ask Jesus into your heart?” “Yes, Dad.” I said, “Why don’t you go upstairs and tell Mom what you did.” She found her mom talking with our six-year-old son, Lee. “Guess what Mommy. I just asked Jesus into my heart.”

Six months later, I was painting a bedroom when Lindsay walked in. Out of the blue I said, “Lindsay, where is Jesus in relation to you?” “In my heart, Dad.” I didn’t know then that a three-year-old was old enough to believe but sure enough. In fact, fast backward to 9/11. Lindsay was 22 and working at the Russell Office Building for the U.S. Senate and heard the airplane go into the Pentagon. Three weeks later, I went to visit her and the two of us drove by the Pentagon where I could see the damage. It was a sobering moment and, as we drove by, I said, “Lindsay, out of curiosity, when was the very first time you became aware of God?” She thought about that for a moment and said, “I think it was when I sat on your lap when I was a little girl and asked Jesus into my heart.” Wow!

The Psalm says it wonderfully: “One generation will commend your works to another; they will tell of your mighty acts.⁵ They will speak of the glorious splendor of your majesty, and I will meditate on your wonderful works.” May our Lord open your mouth and loosen your tongue to speak warmly and openly with your children and grandchildren about your faith in Jesus Christ and to encourage them to believe in him, as well. What greater gift could you give them than the One who will be with them for the rest of their lives and welcome them into his heavenly home?

While I am talking about parents talking to their children about their belief in God, do be aware that we who are sons and daughters, which is all of us, may also speak to our parents about faith. I grew up in an unchurched family. Mom was confirmed here at the National Cathedral, but when I grew up, we only went to church three or four times. Aside from the time she taught me the Lord’s Prayer, she never talked about God or Jesus. Dad never talked about God, although he prayed at the family table on Thanksgiving and Christmas. Prayers I remember vividly to this day. Because my parents never talked about God, I learned about God and Jesus from others, and I realized, not as a pastor but as a son, I needed to talk to mom and dad about Jesus. While nervous about it, it was time for holy boldness—conviction about Jesus to be shared with transparency and courage.

Long after I was out of the house my dad was diagnosed with a very

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serious brain tumor and was in the hospital awaiting a dangerous surgery. On the day of the surgery, I knew I might have no more opportunities to speak with him. So I arose very early and was in his room by 6 a.m. He was sleeping. I just sat there quietly looking at my father. Eventually, his eyes opened. We said, “Hi.” I said, “Dad, I want to say two things to you. When our son, your grandson, Lee, was 18-months-old, he called every man a daddy. ‘There’s a daddy, there’s a daddy, there’s a daddy.’ What distinguished me from other men is that when Lee looked at me he said, ‘That’s MY Daddy.’ Dad, you are my daddy and I am very grateful for it.” That was a very deep moment for the two of us.

Then I said, “Dad, in the Old Testament, King David says, ‘Blessed is the man whose God is the Lord.’ Dad, that Lord has a name and his name is Jesus Christ. Dad, put your trust in Jesus.” Dad became very emotional and, finally, pointing to the ceiling, said, “Faith.” Was that a confession of faith in Jesus by my father? I don’t know for certain but I have real hope that it was and I will see my Dad again. I am so glad I spoke to him, and on a different day, to my mom about Jesus. Whether you are a mom or a dad, a son or a daughter, take on some holy boldness this very day and talk to your children and your parents about the Jesus you embrace, and invite them to embrace Jesus too!

