

Receiving Testimony

John 3:1-21

by the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones
First Central Congregational UCC
20 March 2011

The best preacher currently working in the United States is Anna Carter Florence. That's my opinion, of course.

I first encountered her a few years ago at the Festival of Homiletics. Every year thousands of preachers gather in order to listen to other preachers preach. I know each of you must be envious at the thought of spending every day for an entire week listening to sermons, followed by lectures on preaching, followed by more sermons.

The year I attended I was really looking forward to the big names on the bill – James Forbes, Peter Gomes, Barbara Brown Taylor, Barbara Lundblad, Will Willimon, and Tom Long. These were preachers whose names I'd known for a while. I'd read their books and articles. A few I had listened to or seen videos of. I was really excited to see and hear them in person. But, the friend I was attending with had herself attended the year before and she told me, "We really liked this Anna Carter Florence, though we had never heard of her before." So I was a little prepared.

Now, some of these big name preachers immediately impress you. James Forbes is inherently distinguished. You think, "This is what a great preacher looks like." Peter Gomes had a voice that Henry Louis Gates described as sounding like Cotton Mather returned from the dead. "This is what a great preacher sounds like." Barbara Brown Taylor is tall and beautiful and she has a striking head of silver-white hair. When she steps into the pulpit she immediately commands authority, and your respect.

So, when it was Anna Carter Florence's turn to speak, I was surprised that the woman who stepped up into the pulpit looked like your average suburban housewife. She was young, blonde, and very pregnant. I think she even had her hair pulled into a pony tail.

But when she was done preaching I felt I had heard the best preacher in America. She preached circles around the big names – even though preaching is, of course, not a competitive sport.

She preaches in a very casual, conversational manner, filled with humour. She is really funny. She has this way of disarming you and presenting provocative insights into the biblical stories.

And since that time of listening to her preach, I have become a fan of her essays and commentary, including her comments on the gospel passage before us this morning.

In one issue of the journal *Lectionary Homiletics*, she focuses in on this metaphor of being born again and raises some thoughts I had not encountered before:

"Born" is the past tense of the verb "to bear." And surely that is an apt description of

childbirth. Someone bears us from that world before into this one. She bears the pain, the labor, the weight, the responsibility. She bears us – alien creatures, growing within her very body—and she bears all that comes with us: blood, milk, mess. We are literally born into being, and it is hard work.

She continues:

The Spirit bears with us – alien creatures, growing to fullness in the body of Christ – and the Spirit bears all that comes with us. It is messy and complicated and embarrassingly embodied. There are repercussions. There are consequences. There are stitches and secretions, not all of which are fit for polite conversation.

Part of what delighted me in her commentary was an idea that strangely I had never encountered before -- the favourite metaphor for salvation used by a segment of conservative Christianity is intrinsically a metaphor for divine motherhood. But that's not my main point today.

Being born again is an earthy, messy, inherently complicated and dangerous metaphor for transformation. If we are seeking the kingdom of God, to follow Jesus and become more like God, to experience spiritual growth and new life, then we must go through the really messy and dangerous process of being born again. But, as she reminds us, this is NOT something we can do on our own. We must be born; someone must bear us through this messy and dangerous transformation.

In a later commentary in the book *Feasting on the Word*, Anna Carter Florence expands this idea of being born again with a series of provocative questions. She writes:

So what does 'being born' look like where you live? Why would we want the chance to do it again? More accurately, since we cannot birth ourselves, why would we need someone to *bear* us again? Who bears us and bears with us today, and who has borne us in the past? Is this clean work, or messy work? How are our bodies and spirits involved?

Interesting thoughts. "Who bears us and bears with us today?" Who bears you? Yes, of course Jesus was talking to Nicodemus about the Holy Spirit, about a divine activity. But Anna Carter Florence suggests that this image can be extrapolated into our everyday lives. Who bears us into life? And how do they go about this messy, dangerous, painful work?

There is a line in Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus which we usually overlook, but which stood out to me as I was preparing today's sermon. It is verse eleven, where Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony." Together, this line of Jesus' and the commentary of Anna Carter Florence suggested a spiritual practice of care to me, which is our focus in worship this Lenten season. The practice of care it suggested to me is – the way we are present with one another in conversation and listening. How we "receive each other's testimony" and what role that act of care might play in bearing each other into new life.

So, rather than focus on the theological issues that normally are connected with this

chapter, this morning I want us to imagine how the act of being with one another in conversation is one way we bear each other. Nicodemus came to Jesus in the dark of night, filled with uncertainty and probably fear and anxiety. How can we learn from this conversation about how to care for one another?

First, a fun story. For Christmas my sister Kelli purchased three webcams, one for me and Michael, one for Mom and my step-dad, and one for her own family. Kelli's thought was now that we are all living separated from one another that instead of spending money on phone bills, let's all learn to Skype one another.

If you don't know what Skype is, it is a free on-line video-phone service. So, basically that dream you've had since the Jetsons of talking to other people over great distances while watching a live broadcast image of them now exists. And, better yet, it's free. I'm beginning to think it's maybe the greatest invention ever. Forgive me my hyperbole, but you'll understand when I share the story of what happened this week.

Leaving church I had a voicemail from my almost four-year-old nephew Jacob, "Uncle Scotty, I want to talk to you." There was also a text message from my sister asking if I was free to Skype. She and her family were in Colorado for spring break on a ski trip and Jacob wanted to tell me all about learning to ski.

So, I called in the normal way to say I was heading home and would turn the webcam on. Once we were both on-line, then we connected with each other. Michael and I were sitting on the couch with the laptop in front of us, and Kelli was in her room in the ski lodge with her family, including Jacob who kept jumping up and down, giggling, and playing. He and Connor, the two-year-old, both delight in actually seeing their family members on the computer screen.

Jacob has a few funny Skype habits. For one, he likes to head-butt the web cam, which can sometimes upset the video feed. He also delights in pointing his finger right into the lens so that all you see is the tip of his finger, and then he says, "You!" At that point you are supposed to do the same thing back, point your finger right into the lens so that all he can see is the tip of your finger, and then you say, "You!" At which point Jacob squeals and laughs like it is the funniest thing in the world. Michael and I laughed for about 30 straight minutes while talking with Kelli's family.

After telling me all about his adventures in skiing, and simultaneously e-mailing me pictures to look at on my phone . . . this new technology is amazing . . . as the conversation neared its end Jacob said, "Uncle Scotty I love you. You are my best friend."

Now, one reason this conversation was so important isn't just the joy of that moment. Earlier in the evening my family had received the call that Grandpa's health was declining again and that he had now refused any more surgeries or transfusions. My mother and her siblings were all assembling in his hospital room. My sister and I, both at great distance from the events transpiring in Miami were sad, but via this powerful new technology which makes it easier to engage in an age-old practice of being present and conversing with one another, we both got to delight in the splendid joy of a child.

We need each other to receive our testimony, to talk with us, to listen, to be present. Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, whom we are studying on Wednesday nights, reminds us that "To 'converse' originally meant to live among or together, or to act together, to foster community,

to commune with.”

Conversation – listening, sharing stories, asking the right questions, knowing when silence is best – is an act of care that builds relationship. She writes, “One way to minister to a busy and hurried people is to take, and offer, time for conversation.” This is a gift we give one another.

I hadn’t been at Rolling Hills in Fayetteville, Arkansas very long when we got a call one Sunday afternoon. A few of us were still at the church building for a meeting, and it is odd that anyone answered the phone, since the office wasn’t open. The phone call came from Mary Jane Haley. The message was that her daughter in Oklahoma had died.

I left the meeting and headed over to Mary Jane’s house. Mary Jane was a widow in her late eighties whose husband had been a pastor. She lived with her daughter Mary Ann and had another daughter in Oklahoma with her family. Mary Jane is a traditionalist. It was clear that she didn’t know what to make of the young minister with new ideas, though I was beginning to win her over. She once said, with a wicked little grin, that she enjoyed when I took her to lunch because she enjoyed going out to lunch with a younger man.

When I got to Mary Jane’s house she, of course, was deeply troubled. I sat her down and asked her what had happened. She had received a call from one of her grandchildren who told her that her daughter had died. They asked Mary Jane to get ahold of Mary Ann and for Mary Ann to call when she got home so they could give her the rest of the information.

Mary Jane was not yet grief-stricken, she was still too anxious and confused about what had happened and why no one had told her any details. There was an air of something awful about the events that we couldn’t quite figure out. I simply sat with her while we waited for Mary Ann, who soon arrived.

Mary Ann went in to call the family in Oklahoma to find out what had happened to her sister. When she got off of the phone, she came and sat down across from us and she told us the details. As I sat beside Mary Jane on the couch and held her hand, she received the news that her daughter had been murdered. She was murdered by the man who had been living with Mary Jane’s granddaughter, a man who had been a part of their family for many years and was the father of Mary Jane’s great-grandchildren. You can imagine the shock and horror of hearing such news.

I was a new minister, in my first call. And I was almost a stranger to this woman with whom I was now sharing an intimate, sacred moment. I did what seemed best; I simply held her hand. Needless to say, that experience bonded Mary Jane and me. She remains one of my dearest friends in that church.

Being born through the dark nights of our lives is NOT something we can do on our own. We must bear each other. How do we go about this messy, dangerous, painful work? One way we care for one another is to be present, in conversation and listening. Marilyn Chandler McEntyre again: Conversation is a “life-sustaining practice, a blessing, and a craft to be cultivated for the common good.”

So, this Lent, I encourage you to take those moments for yourself and for others. Be present with one another. Listen and share stories and laugh and play and, when need be, simply hold someone’s hand. It may be one of the best gifts you’ve ever received.