

Sermon by Stephen Farris, Retired Dean, St. Andrews Hall, Vancouver

Sermon Title: What I have I give you

Longer precis for the church website

After the resurrection, Jesus said to his disciples “You will be my witnesses”. Importantly, when the disciples were told this they were together and the expectation was that they would act together as the church and the church would be His witness.

Subsequently, Peter and John bear witness to a man lame from birth who has sat at the gate of the temple every day asking for money. When he asks the two disciples, they look intently at him and say “Look at us”. He expected to receive some money but Peter says “I have no silver or gold but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk”

It would be easy for us to say that we haven’t had a vision of the risen Christ and we certainly can’t heal anyone in a miraculous way. What we can do, however, is witness as a church.

Reverend Farris reminisced about a time when he was visiting churches and ancient towns in Tuscany, Italy. However, it was not the best of vacations as he was experiencing a spiritual drought aggravated by seeing too many representations of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary and other masterworks of art that represented things, which he, as a Protestant did not believe in. However, in the final day of his stay, he visited the town of Assisi and the church of St. Mary of the Angels. His guidebook confused him as it spoke of the small chapel in which Francis and his brothers had prayed and the cell in which the saint had endured his final illness. But it also described a huge church, the seventh largest church in Christendom, built in 1569 with money supplied by King Philip II of Spain. The money came from the plunder of the Spanish colonies in the New World, which caused great suffering for natives in Mexico and Peru. Knowing this, Rev. Farris’ attitude was quite negative as he entered the large and opulent church but it changed when he saw the Porziuncola, the small rough built chapel where Francis had prayed housed within the larger church structure. As Rev. Farris sat in the nave, he heard a Franciscan monk read the same Scripture lesson that began this sermon and he suddenly had a new understanding of “Silver and gold have I none, but what I have I give you”. Rev. Farris observed the stark contrast of the outer and the inner church – the proud and sinful church as an institution on the one hand and the simple pure gospel within – the gospel of Francis himself. He also recognized that if the large church had not been built around the little chapel that it would have fallen apart centuries ago.

Similarly, the gospel does not exist on its own but is sheltered within the church with all its many faults with much of its history still shameful. We, as a church, need to do better to purify the church so that it can be a more fitting means to God’s good ends but it is still a place for the gospel to be found.

It is recorded that Francis had a vision of the risen Christ and that he was commanded to “Go and repair My house which, as you can see, is falling into ruins”. That is part of the role of the church today.

Rev. Farris concluded his sermon with a quote from Mother Teresa who was being mocked by a young reporter at the time she received her Nobel prize for making only a small impact on the problems of India with the very limited help she could give the poor and the dying. Her retort was “Young man, I do what I can, where I am, with what I have.”

Rev. Farris encouraged us to think about what we have and, then to recognize that when we give what we have, that is witness.

Possible precis for Facebook

After the resurrection, Jesus said to his disciples “You will be my witnesses”. They were to be the church that would protect and disseminate God’s revelation of Himself through Jesus’ teachings.

Peter and John witnessed to a man lame from birth who had sat at the gate of the temple every day asking for money. The disciples said they had “no silver or gold but what I have, I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk”.

The church today has many faults but just as the large opulent church in the Assisi surrounds and protects the Porziuncola, the small rough built chapel where Francis had lived and prayed, so the church today is still the place where the gospel is found. Were it not for the church, the gospel could have been lost.

Although what we may have to give as a witness for Jesus Christ may seem small, as Mother Teresa said “I do what I can, where I am, with what I have.” When we give what we have, that is a witness for Christ.