

Grace to you and peace from God, our creator, and from our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

We live in a world that thrives on labeling; we label others and we label ourselves. In our society, in the US, when we're asked who we are – many times we answer that question with what we do. We are taught from an early age that that's where our identity and value are. And it becomes our label.

We're preoccupied with a person's family background, socio-economic status, politics, where they were educated, where they work, where they live, what kind of car they drive. And on, and on.

We're drawn to who's famous, who has the most notoriety. Because we are taught that the person with the biggest profile is the most important and that that's what matters. Doesn't matter if they're qualified for what they're doing.

In matters of bearing witness to God and to Jesus in our world, we often confuse those things with faithfulness. We're conditioned to believe that if someone is flashier or has a big personality and also claims to be a person of faith, then they must be one. They must be living the way Jesus teaches us to live – even when their actions don't reflect it – because that's the label that has been put on them.

But what would it mean if, instead, when asked who we are – we answer based on who we are in relationship to Jesus. That when someone claims to be a person of faith, we look first to see whether they live in such a way that they love God and their neighbor – no exceptions.

That that's how they describe themselves – not in a way that makes them seem better than anyone else. But in a way that simply says, "I am who I am because of who Jesus is."

When we think about people like that in the Bible, they're usually not flashy. For example, when we think of John the Baptist, we usually think of the description in Mark's gospel: someone who lives in the wild, wears clothes made of camel's hair, and eats locusts and wild honey. He gets people's attention, but not in the same way that someone with political or social power does.

But the person described in today's gospel reading, doesn't have any of those characteristics – at least not that we're told.

The person we read about today is the same person we call John the Baptist. But his role is different in this gospel; he isn't described as "the Baptist" because he doesn't baptize Jesus.

Instead, he's a witness to Jesus' baptism and to who Jesus is.

But before we get to that – the priests and Levites had some questions about who John is. He had been baptizing people and probably doing some of the things the other gospels tell us about him.

And it isn't clear whether John had the authority to do those things, but he'd drawn some attention to himself. So, the authorities sent some people to ask who he was. And they weren't happy with his answers.

To be fair, John answered their questions with just the facts. He didn't volunteer any extra information, or try to make things easier for them. And it frustrated them.

But in his answers, it's clear that John knows who he is, and also who he is not. He didn't let other people label him. He described who he is in relationship to Jesus because, as a witness to Jesus, he knew that everything he said and did was about Jesus and not about him.

And it was important that others understood that.

When it comes to matters of faith, the words "witness" and "testimony" have been hijacked. And in the church, many people shy away from them because when we hear those two words, we picture people knocking on our door and asking whether we're saved, or someone speaking at a tent revival.

But at its most basic level, a witness is a person who can give a firsthand account of something seen, heard, or experienced. And a testimony is the statement or declaration of a witness. And when a witness testifies to something, they stake their life on it.

So, later on in this chapter when John pointed to Jesus and said, "That's the guy. He's the Messiah." it was serious business. And even though he spoke the truth, not everyone wanted to hear it. And some people even felt threatened by it. But John's witness set an example for us.

And in the role that he plays in this gospel as John the Witness, he teaches us that pointing to Jesus, bearing witness to Jesus, matters. It makes a difference not only in our lives when we do it, but in the lives of others when they witness it – when they receive it.

As people who follow Jesus, bearing witness to him is our primary role in life. And who we are in relationship to Jesus is about witnessing to the presence of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit in the world and in the lives of the people of God. Not just in a general, nebulous sense – but in our lives.

The world can be a scary place – a wilderness, and people need to know that Jesus is still among us, in the midst of everything that’s going on. And they won’t know unless we point it out to them.

They need to know why it still matters that God came to us as Jesus – and the difference that that makes in our lives and in our world. And none of this means that we have to have all the answers or be able to explain complicated theology. In fact, I think it’s better if we don’t.

Because when you bear witness to Jesus, what people want to know is why his presence in the world matters to you. Each of us has experienced the power of Jesus in our lives, and that’s what people want to know about.

When we honestly talk about that, in a manner of speaking, we stake our lives on it. We’re able to say, “No – having Jesus in my life doesn’t mean that everything is sunshine and roses all the time. But the power of Jesus’ presence in my life has shown me that whatever hard time I’m going through won’t last, that I will come out on the other side, that he’s with me every step of the way. Here’s how I know...here’s how I live because of it.”

When we honestly talk about the power of Jesus in our lives, it isn’t about us. It’s about who we are in relationship to him. When we honestly talk about that, we speak the truth about who God is, and we invite others to “come and see,” to experience God’s love and grace, and learn that it’s for everyone.

And in those times when we can’t – in those times in our lives when we’re overwhelmed or confused, or we’re just at a point that we ourselves can’t point to Jesus – we depend on others to do it for us.

We depend on them to witness to us. We listen to their experiences as they point to Jesus and remind us of the very real hope brought forth by his birth.

John the Witness knew who he was. But, more importantly, he knew who he was not. He was clear about that, and he refused to let people identify him as anyone other than who he was.

And what he did as a witness to Jesus mattered. The gospels wouldn't have recorded it if it didn't. He teaches us that pointing to Jesus, bearing witness to Jesus, matters. It makes a difference not only in our lives, but in the lives of others when they witness it – when they receive it.

May we remember who we are. That we are who we are because of who Jesus is. May our relationship with him be what guides us in our witness and in our lives, so that we may always be able to say, "Thanks be to God!" Amen.