

November 13, 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time: Luke 21:5-19

## **I'd left the practice of testimony in my childhood church. Then I learned why Luke suggests it when your world is falling apart.**

by [Scott D. Anderson](#) in the [October 25, 2016](#) issue

Public testimony was a big part of my church life growing up. My grandfather was a famed traveling evangelist connected to the Evangelical Covenant tradition. One uncle was a Conservative Baptist pastor; another traveled the globe distributing free copies of the New Testament and gathering converts' stories. Our extended family regularly celebrated personal testimonies in worship and in Sunday school, where church members shared stories of repentance and transformation.

My parents, both introverts, were more subdued. While we talked about others' testimony, I never heard them give their own—and I was never compelled to share mine. After they divorced, my father found his way to a Presbyterian congregation. In his first adult Sunday school class, he encountered two Presbyterians at odds over the interpretation of scripture. He knew he had found a spiritual home. "In the Presbyterian Church," he regularly told me, "I don't feel I have to leave my brains in the narthex."

I followed in his footsteps. The more subdued, intellectual faith of the Reformed tradition seemed to push personal witness to the spiritual sidelines. This appealed to me. Sound doctrine and a more modest, incarnational form of discipleship replaced the effervescence and subjectivism of testimony.

After eight years of parish ministry, that all changed for me. Two members of the congregation I served learned that I was a closeted gay man. They responded by attempting to blackmail me. Compelled to leave the ministry soon after, I became deeply involved for almost 20 years in the national struggle over gay ordination in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). In that conflict I discovered the transformative power of personal testimony that I had witnessed as a child.

Luke counsels the followers of Jesus to offer testimony as a life-giving response to danger and loss. The destruction of the Jerusalem temple and the ongoing persecution of the early Christian community led Luke to frame his counsel to those early Christians in apocalyptic terms: “But before all this occurs,” he writes, “they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify.”

Giving testimony is a way to cope with grief. If the world around us is falling apart, Luke suggests, then giving testimony is an opportunity to share the enormous pain about our bleakest circumstances, to share it with God and with one another. The first time I gave my public testimony about God’s work in my life as a gay man was in an adult education class, six months after I left the ministry. In giving my testimony I found the courage to name the incredible loss I experienced in stepping away from my beloved call as a pastor, shared in the context of the love of Christ I also had experienced through so many friends and colleagues in ministry.

Giving testimony is also a powerful form of truth telling. Luke’s community knew firsthand the injustices and hardships of persecution. Apocalyptic language was a way of naming the truth of their situation—and in the midst of an unjust system, personal witness offered a disarming critique. Sharing my personal testimony was the context for me to name the church’s unjust treatment of LGBTQ believers and the ways the gospel is at odds with the practices of exclusion. My testimony became the avenue to speak the unspeakable in polite church company, as I gave witness to God’s ongoing healing and reconciling work in my life as a gay man.

Ultimately, testimony is not the story of our feeble efforts to overcome impossible circumstances. It is the narrative of God’s work. Often the opponents of LGBTQ ordination would frame our advocacy work in secular political terms, implying that the ongoing struggle for civil rights in the wider culture was now infecting church orthodoxy. But over two decades I heard countless LGBTQ believers stand before committees at national church assemblies and testify to how God had led them to embrace and accept their true identity. This public witness reframed the ordination question as wholly different from secular politics, as spiritually more alive than an impersonal debate about doctrine or hermeneutics. It was about transformed people—and as such, it was inherently subversive. Personal testimony, as Luke concludes, is a form of “wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.”

Finally, giving testimony creates community. As we discover throughout the Luke-Acts narrative, the members of Luke's community experienced *koinonia* in giving their personal testimonies at their darkest moments. As someone who felt like an outsider in the PCUSA for two decades, the only place I could claim insider status was with the relatively small band of LGBTQ Presbyterians and our heterosexual friends who were at the forefront of the struggle for a more welcoming church. Shared pain, clear-eyed truth telling, and daily witness to the ongoing work of God's spirit in our midst—these things led to a powerful form of community that was able to sustain itself, even thrive, through a tumultuous period of Presbyterian history.

After a 21-year hiatus, I returned to ordained ministry in 2011 when the PCUSA changed its policy of categorical exclusion. In my life and ministry, the power of personal testimony continues to be a gift I receive. It has become an integral part of my Christian vocation.