

## **Give a Good Testimony**

How many of you were disturbed by last Friday's Supreme Court ruling regarding gay marriage? While I wasn't surprised, I was certainly saddened by what the court did. Of course, the internet exploded with articles and blogs and tweets and who knows what else, many celebrating the decision. But many also expressed rage and despair and even fear. Where do we go from here? I don't mean physically. There's no place on earth we can go to escape this kind of thinking – at least no place where we could practice our faith freely in its other respects. But how are we Christians going to respond to this kind of attack on the Word of God? There are lots of things that could be said and even should be said – more than I can fit into one sermon. But I think that we can put them all under one simple heading: **Give a good testimony.**

**I. Give a good testimony about God's gift of marriage.**

**II. Give a good testimony in the face of persecution.**

### **I.**

The sad truth is that our country has changed. When I entered the ministry, a majority of Americans were opposed to gay marriage. Here in Michigan, we passed a ban on gay marriage in a referendum. I doubt that ban would pass here again. A majority of Americans support the court's decision. But we still have something to say. Christians have often found themselves in the position of being the lone voice for what God says in societies that doesn't want to hear the truth. God calls us, in America today, to share that truth, even with those who don't want to hear it. **Give a good testimony about God's gift of marriage.**

This decision should make something crystal clear to us: America is not a Christian nation. The truth is, it never really was. Now, there have been periods in our history when the majority of our citizens were Christians and that is still true today. But all societies are founded on principles of this world and all governments have the capacity to turn against God. What has changed in America is the role that religion plays in people's decision making. In the past, most people believed that their faith determined the choices they made in life. That is not true today. Most surveys indicate that most people today do not believe that the church has anything to say about what they do in their lives. Most Americans do not believe that your faith should in any way affect your opinions or your actions. If you accept that proposition, then you do not belong to God, because he says that he will judge how you live and what you think and what choices you make. But most Americans reject that truth today. So you have the strange phenomenon that a majority of Americans claim to be Christians, but only a minority take a stand based on what God says. That leads us to where we are today.

So what do we do? Certainly, there is a political element to this issue and there is a proper place for you as citizens of this country to exercise your faith in your political activities. I hope you will engage politically on this question. But inside this building, we are not talking about politics. I will not encourage you to vote for a political party or candidate. Our voters assembly will not endorse candidates or ballot measures or launch political protests. No one will be allowed to hand out political fliers before or after church. Our concern here is spiritual, not political. Our testimony as a church needs to address moral and spiritual questions, not political ones.

At the same time, what the Supreme Court did affects us all and we should be troubled by this decision. It embraces sin and calls it a blessing for our country. It twists all that God says about love and righteousness. It is simply contrary to the word of God. But we need to see this issue in larger terms than just the debate over gay rights. This is about marriage and sexuality, which are gifts that God designed and God gives. He tells us how to use them in a way that will be a blessing for us. The church needs to give a clear and truthful and loving testimony about what God says. We need to show with our lives and our words that following God's will brings blessings, and ignoring it brings pain. We need to be prepared for the hurt and the spiritual destruction that this decision will bring on our society and we need to be a place of healing and love and truth. So it's not enough for our synod or our congregation to make statements. In our personal lives and our personal testimony, we all need to be clear and truthful and loving.

We need to confess all that God says about marriage. There is a certain hypocrisy among us Christians on this issue. We are enraged by gay marriage, but we seem to give a free pass to living together and divorce. Those things are just as much sins against marriage as homosexuality is. Today, the vast majority of couples

live together before they get married. In many cases, they already have children. We just accept that. That's wrong. You parents of adult children have a responsibility to testify to your children if they live in sin. We have a responsibility as a congregation to discipline that sin against marriage. The same goes for divorce. God gives two reasons for divorce: cheating and leaving. Now, under leaving, we can include things like spousal abuse, substance abuse, and some other things. But we cannot accept "wanting different things out of life" or "we just fight too much and I can't take it anymore." That is just as sinful as homosexuality. If we're going to give clear testimony about marriage, we need to be consistent in our practice and our discipline and our teaching. The same goes for what we watch on television and what websites we visit.

God gave us marriage as a blessing. The heart of marriage is not romantic love. It's commitment. Now that commitment does show itself in love that sacrifices and works for the good of our spouse. But marriage is first of all a commitment before God, between one man and one woman. They promise to be faithful to each other for as long as they both shall live. They promise to be there for each other, in sickness and in health, in poverty and in material wealth. It is that promise made and kept that gives all the blessings we receive through God's gift of marriage. And they are blessings. My friends, I was single until I was thirty. I know what it's like to be a single adult. While my wife and I are both sinners and we struggle sometimes to live up to that commitment to love each other, she is the greatest blessing of my life. That blessing is what we must uphold in our godless society. We need to testify to all of what God says, if we're going to have any hope of giving a clear testimony on this particular attack on God's gift. It is hypocrisy for us to be enraged on this one point but to be OK with all the other ways our society attacks God's institution.

Are we hypocrites? Only you can examine your own heart. But my experience after more than two decades of ministry is that we struggle not to be. We drink deep of our society's attitudes and so we struggle to hold up the truth, even in our hearts on these issues. But my friends, Jesus died for that sin, too. There was no one who ever upheld God's gift of marriage like he did. He wasn't married, but he honored God's gift through his own sexual purity. He honored God's gift by honoring the marriages around him and teaching his followers to embrace God's gift. He was perfect, not just as an example. But he was perfect in our place. His love of marriage counts for us. Then he died and he paid for all our lust and all our sexual sins, he died and paid for every husband or wife who ever cheated, who ever left, who ever lived together before they were married. And yes, he died and paid for homosexuality, too, and for accepting our society's definitions and attitudes. He died and paid for the sin in our hearts that makes us hypocritical on these issues. His blood washes all that sin away. He rose and we are forgiven. All the sin that we have ever committed is gone so we will live with him forever.

That forgiveness needs to be the heart of our testimony. Jesus died for gays, for adulterers, for all sinners everywhere. Only knowing that he lived and died and rose for me will enable me to honor my wife and be faithful in my marriage. Only knowing Jesus' love and work for me will enable me to give a good testimony, first of all by having a Christian marriage and secondly by confessing to the world all that God says about marriage. Let us uphold the gospel. Moved by that gospel, let us give clear instruction to those inside the church and clear testimony to those outside of what a truly blessed marriage is.

## II.

And let's not be under any illusions about what that's going to mean for us personally. Our society has decided that God made people gay and the only loving thing is to accept it. It does not want to be bothered by any facts that interfere with its opinions. We are going to suffer for standing up for the truth. But Jesus told us to take up our cross and follow him. My friends, **give a good testimony in the face of persecution.**

In the dissenting opinion, the justices who disagreed pointed out that Christians who stand up for the truth are now probably going to experience persecution. There is a paragraph in the majority decision that says that Christians can still argue for what they believe. But there is no guarantee that we will be allowed to practice our beliefs. Whether the government ever cracks down on us or not, society is going to condemn us. You see that in how the news covered this. The heroes are those courageous people who stand up for gay rights. Those who don't are hatemongers. We should expect to hear the scriptures twisted to justify this position. We should expect that people will be refused jobs and scholarships if they express what the Bible says. We should expect public universities to engage in even greater efforts to compel our kids to accept this point of view.

I could stand up here all day talking about the kinds of things that might happen. But it's enough to say that we live in a sinful world. If the devil can't take our faith away, then he wants to silence us so we don't testify to others. And he wants to hurt us, because he's evil and he enjoys our pain. The truth is, he hurts his

followers, too, just as much as he hurts us. No one ever really benefits from living in sin. The world is against us. Understand what we mean by “the world.” We don’t mean nature. We mean people. Our society is going to shout us down. Jesus said that all people would hate us because of him. We need to expect the haters to call us haters and throw our love for God’s word back in our faces. We need to understand how much the sinner inside us does not want to suffer for God’s word. We need to understand how weak that makes us and how tempted we will be. That’s where all the fear comes from when we think about what this is going to mean.

How will we stand? Jesus promised that he would be with us. He promised that he would give us wisdom that cannot be contradicted. He promised that he would defend us from the devil, the world and our sinful flesh and he would bring us home. He promised that the gates of hell will not prevail against his church, even while promised that we will face persecution for the truth. In all those promises, we have the power of God. He will work in our hearts and give us faith and courage and wisdom. He will make us strong.

He will teach us what really matters. If we lose everything here, we still win, because we have eternal life. It’s not possible for us to make a society here that follows what God says. We live in a sinful world. But we are going home. Jesus died and rose to bring us home. He calls us to do his work here, to pay whatever price we have to here, and then to live with him forever. He will work through the gospel to give us the strength and the courage and the gifts we need to stand in an evil world. That means that by his power, we will even stand in persecution. In fact, sometimes God lets us suffer persecution to remind us how little this life matters and how much more important the life to come is.

So right now, prepare yourself to stand: hear his gospel message. Come to communion. Study his word. Pray for his protection and for growth in faith and in knowledge. Feed your faith so that when the evil day comes, you will be ready. Trust all those promises of God. Through them, you will give a good testimony in an evil world and you will live forever. Amen.