

Telling Stories

John 1: 19-28 (December 17, 2017)

John 1: 19-21

19This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" 20He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." 21And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No."

Historical Context

The text tells us more about who John *wasn't* than about who he *was*. Who, then, was he? He was a witness (John 1:7) and he was a voice (John 1:23), albeit a voice telling people to prepare for someone else.

There are probably historical reasons for this subordination. Many of the commentaries discuss various versions of a theory that John's significance had to be downplayed in some segments of the church because his followers had become competitors with the followers of Jesus. Thus, John himself is represented as directing his followers to Jesus and as declaring that "he must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).

Whatever political struggles might have influenced the Fourth Gospel's presentation of events, John is a witness (*martyría*; John 1:7) who testifies (*martyréo*; John 1:7, 19) to the good news of Jesus Christ. When a witness testifies to something, he or she stakes his or her life on it; a "false witness" commits perjury, a capital offense.

Theme: Telling Stories

John's identity is crucial to how he is able to bear witness and what his character witness means. However, in the end, this passage isn't so much about John as it is about his testimony.

John's witness lends credibility to Jesus' movement. Furthermore, in John's gospel, witness is the beginning of faith -- bearing witness to the Word, Jesus Christ is the foundation for the emergence of human faith in God.

Testimony is a true, first-person account of an experience. While it has come, over time, to carry additional connotations, at its core it is the practice of making a public statement about what you have seen, heard, and experienced for yourself. Testimony is a practice in which anyone can participate.

Harvard professor and community organizer Marshall Ganz says, "Stories not only teach us how to act -- they inspire us to act. Stories communicate our values through the language of the heart, our emotions. And it is what we feel -- our hopes, our cares, our obligations -- not simply what we know, that can inspire us with the courage to act."

John bore witness to Jesus. Could John be right that faith grows from telling these stories?