

## Death by Greed 4-6-08

Last Sunday David and I offered a challenge or an invitation to all who were here to read the entire book of Acts by today. Acts has 28 chapters, so that would have involved reading 4 chapters each day. For some this may have been a welcome challenge. For others, it may have seemed difficult. For some, the stories in Acts are familiar and you have read them many times. For others, the stories are as new as the idea of reading an entire book of the Bible in that short amount of time. And, of course, there are some who may not have completed the task, but not to worry... just keep reading until you finish.

The great thing about reading an entire book of the Bible from beginning to end is that it allows the story to have more integrity and to be seen as a whole, within its context. When we just read one story here and another there, often we miss the connections and the way in which the stories are woven together to paint a bigger picture of what

was going on and the issues and joys and challenges the early church faced and how that might relate to us today.

We find Acts in the New Testament, immediately following the four gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John - then comes Acts. Acts tells the story of what happened after Jesus' death and resurrection. It follows the events beginning with Jesus' ascension and ending with Paul's arrival as a prisoner in Rome. In his introduction to Acts, one commentator says, "There is no book in the Bible that compares in any way with the Book of Acts. It stands alone among all the narratives as a supernatural action-adventure. If this story were ever told on the silver screen, it would require actors of tremendous strength and presence to fill the sandals of Peter (for example, Bono) and Paul (for example, Russell Crowe)."

David and I have been captivated by the fast-pace and amazing adventure of Acts, so we decided to preach in episode fashion. We thought about some of the key characters and stories of Acts, and we

identified what was the conflict or barrier and how does it get resolved. We will not be preaching chronologically, but rather episodically. We hope you find meaning and inspiration and hope as we follow the adventures of the early followers of Jesus. We hope those stories become our own as we seek to follow Jesus in our lives.

Having said all that, this week's adventure, I must confess, is a bit cryptic. Today's episode follows a story from Acts that people don't like. In fact, this story is so bad, it is not even part of the three year set of readings through the Bible called the Common Lectionary. It didn't make the cut. Yet, here is where we begin, with *Death by Greed*.

This really is a terrible story. It's no wonder people tend to avoid it. It is very unsettling, to say the least. I mean, really, dropping dead seems a little harsh. What harm did they really do? What's the big deal? The story itself tells us that "fear overcame all those who heard of the incident." Maybe we're all thinking - well, I could be next.

I make mistakes. I may exaggerate the truth from time to time.

Yikes!

Do you have the picture in your mind? Here is a couple in this newly forming group of Jews who believe that Jesus was the promised one. Maybe they heard Peter preach and were stirred in their hearts to be part of this community of followers of the risen Christ, the liberating one who brings a new way of life. But they didn't really understand what that meant exactly. They liked the idea of it. They wanted to be admired by the community. They wanted people to think they were totally committed. So, like others in this gathering of believers, they decided to sell some property and give money to support the ministry of the community. Cool. But, unlike others, they decided to give only a portion of their profit from the sale, but tell people they had given it all.

Peter confronts Ananias' motives. "Look, it was your property before you sold it, and the money was all yours after you sold it. Why

have you concocted this scheme in your heart? You weren't just lying to us; you were lying to God." At that, Ananias drops dead. And the cycle repeats with his wife, Sapphira.

This is truly one of those stories that you cannot understand in isolation from its context within the larger story. I don't think the point of this story is that if you don't put enough in the offering God will strike you dead. If that were the case people would be afraid to come to church. But this story gives us an important glimpse into the way following Jesus impacted all parts of the lives of the early believers. So let's take a look at the events that led up to this incident. You'll see what a contrast this story is to everything that comes before. It's kind of like one of those crime investigation shows. You know, the episode begins with the death of someone, and then the investigators try to retrace the steps and look for clues to solve the mystery.

For us, that takes us back to the beginning of Acts. Jesus is with

the followers and then ascends into heaven. The Holy Spirit is poured out on the people which is a sermon for another day. And Peter begins preaching which brings many Jews to believe that maybe Jesus was the promised one of God. Thousands come to seek that way of life which Jesus lived and taught and for which Jesus died. And we get clues of what that life was like. People were being liberated from their old ways and finding new life in Christ. They spent much time together. They were committed to learning from the apostles, they ate together, read and studied scripture, and, they prayed together. They prayed a lot!

The entire community of believers was deeply united in heart and soul. They were surrounded by extraordinary grace. "There was an intense sense of togetherness among all who believed;" they shared everything so that there was no one in need. These new disciples praised God and had the goodwill of all the people. It was amazing! And it was real. It wasn't just a show.

People were changed and that change naturally spilled over into every aspect of their lives. This spirit was contagious. It infected and affected all those around these new believers. People were being healed and fed and valued in unique and astounding ways. Kindness and care and generosity were the order of the day. Can you imagine such a strong spirit? By the end of chapter 4 in Acts, we hear of a man who was so generous, he sold a field and brought all the money to the apostles who were so touched, they named him Barnabas, which means "son of encouragement." We'll hear more about Barnabas later. But, the very next story told in Acts is that of Ananias and Sapphira who represent the antithesis of all that had been described and celebrated up to this point in our adventure. Barnabus, without provocation, freely gave what he had for the ministry and mission and purposes of God. Ananias and Sapphira wanted to be revered like Barnabus, but without the sacrifice and generous heart to go with it.

That is the context of these deaths. On the one hand, we have a

community of people overflowing in generosity and care for one another; self-giving love so that no one is in need. Truly, a picture of the kingdom of God on earth. On the other hand, we have a couple of people who think they can mock this new way of being. They think they can put on some kind of show and make people think they are changed, that they are part of this Jesus' way, but without really changing. It is a facade. It is not real. It is still tied to the old ways which lead to death and destruction instead of new life. This new life stuff is real. And it is important. And it is about transformation of the inside - of the heart - not the outside, not just appearances; not to be esteemed or popular, but to be both blessed and a blessing.

Those who were truly set free by the liberating power of Jesus behaved in some ways that still make sense for us today. It is still important that we gather together to learn about Jesus' ways and to worship God and to break bread uniting by God's grace and love. And it is still important that we, like those first followers, continue to pray;

pray for one another; pray that the power of Jesus' message make this world a better place for all God's children, young and old, near and far, rich and poor; pray for vision and passion and the courage to be God's people. And it is still important to put our resources together that needs be met and that God's love be experienced.

Following Jesus, while it is filled with blessing and joy, is, nonetheless, a difficult road. There are challenges and obstacles both internally and externally. The old ways still call to us. Our perspective can sometimes be small and self-centered. That is why we need one another. That is why we come together and share our joys and sorrows. That is why we worship and eat and pray together. For we are fellow travelers on a journey together, following the way of Jesus. May we experience the abundant life, united in heart and soul, and surrounded by extraordinary grace. Amen.

Settle back. I'm going to read you a story. It's the contemporary retelling of the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts that Brian McLaren has done.

<sup>1</sup>Cornelius was an officer in the Roman military and a member of an elite unit called the Italian Cohort. He lived in Caesarea. <sup>2</sup>Cornelius was a Gentile but he was a devout man - a God-fearing fellow with a God-fearing family. He consistently and generously gave to the poor; and he practiced constant prayer to God. <sup>3</sup>about 3:00 one afternoon he had a vision of an angel of God. Everything in the vision seemed so distinct, so real.

Angel: Cornelius!

Cornelius: <sup>4</sup>{terrified} What is it, sir?

Angel: God has heard your prayers, and has seen your kindness to the poor. God has taken notice of you. <sup>5-6</sup>Send men south to Joppa, to the house of a tanner named Simon. Ask to speak to a guest of his named Simon, also called Peter. You'll find this house near the waterfront.

<sup>7</sup>After the angel departed, Cornelius immediately called two of his slaves and a soldier under his command - an especially devout soldier. <sup>8</sup>He told them the whole story and sent them down to Joppa.

<sup>9</sup>Just as these men were nearing Joppa about noon the next day, Peter went up on the flat rooftop of Simon the tanner's house. He planned to pray, <sup>10</sup>but he soon grew hungry. While his lunch was being prepared Peter had a vision of his own - a vision that linked his present hunger with what was about to happen. <sup>11</sup>A rift opens in the sky and a wide container - something like a huge sheet suspended by its four corners - descends through the torn opening toward the ground. <sup>12</sup>This container teems with four-footed animals, creatures that crawl, and birds - pigs, bats, lizards, snakes, frogs, toads, and vultures.

Voice: <sup>13</sup>Get up, Peter! Kill! Eat!

Peter: <sup>14</sup>No way, Lord! These animals are disgusting! They're forbidden for Jews! I've never eaten non-kosher foods like these before - not once in my life!

Voice: <sup>15</sup>If God calls something permissible and clean, **you** must not call it forbidden and dirty!

<sup>16</sup>Peter saw this vision three times, but the third time, the container of animals flew up through the rift in the sky, the rift healed. <sup>17</sup>Peter was confused and unsettled as he tried to make sense of this strange vision.

At that very moment, Peter heard the voices of Cornelius's delegation, who had asked for directions to Simon the tanner's house, coming from the front gate.

Delegation: <sup>18</sup>Is there a man named Simon, also called Peter, staying at this house?

<sup>19-20</sup>Peter's mind was still racing about the vision when the voice of the Holy Spirit broke through his churning thoughts.

Holy Spirit: The three men who are searching for you have been sent by me. So get up! Go with them. Don't hesitate or argue.

<sup>21</sup>Peter rushed downstairs to the men.

Peter: I'm the one you're seeking. Can you tell me why you've come?

Delegation: <sup>22</sup>We've been sent by our commander and master, Cornelius. He is an officer in the Roman army and he is a good, honest Gentile who worships your God. All the Jewish people speak well of him. An angel told him to send for you so you would come to his home and he could hear your message.

<sup>23</sup>Peter extended hospitality to them and gave them lodging overnight. When they departed together the next morning, Peter brought along some believers from Joppa.

<sup>24</sup>They arrived in Caesarea the next afternoon just before three o'clock. Cornelius had anticipated their arrival and had assembled his relatives and close friends to welcome them. <sup>25</sup>When Peter and Cornelius met, Cornelius fell at Peter's feet in worship, <sup>26</sup>but Peter helped him up.

Peter: Stand up, man! I am just a human being!

<sup>27</sup>They talked and entered the house to meet the whole crowd inside.

Peter: <sup>28</sup>You know I am a Jew. I would **never** enter the home of Gentiles like yourselves. We Jews consider it a breach of divine law to associate, much less share hospitality, with Gentiles. But God has shown me something in

recent days: **I should no longer consider any human beneath me or unclean.** <sup>29</sup>That's why I made no objection when you invited me; rather, I came willingly. Now, let me hear the story of why you invited me here.

Cornelius: <sup>30</sup>It was about this time of day four days ago when I was here, in my house, praying the customary mid-afternoon prayer. Suddenly, a man appeared out of nowhere. His clothes were dazzling white, and he stood directly in front of me <sup>31</sup>and addressed me: "Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your kindness to the poor has been noticed by God. <sup>32</sup>God wants you to find a man in Joppa, Simon who is also called Peter, who is staying at the home of a tanner named Simon, near the seaside." <sup>33</sup>I wasted no time, did just as I was told, and you have generously accepted my invitation. So here we are, in the presence of God, ready to take in all that the Lord has told you to tell us.

Peter: <sup>34</sup>It is clear to me now that God plays no favorites, <sup>35</sup>that God accepts every person whatever his or her culture or ethnic background, that God welcomes all who revere and do right. <sup>36</sup>You already know that God sent a message to the people of Israel; it was a message of peace, peace through Jesus the Liberating King - who is King of all people. <sup>37</sup>You know this message spread through Judea, beginning in Galilee where John called people to be washed ceremonially or baptized. <sup>38</sup>You know God identified Jesus as the uniquely chosen one by pouring out the Holy Spirit on him, by empowering him. You know Jesus went through the land doing good for all and healing all who were suffering under the oppression of the Evil One, for God was with him. <sup>39</sup>My friends and I stand as witnesses to all Jesus did in the region of Judea and the city of Jerusalem. The people of our capital city killed him by hanging him on a tree, <sup>40</sup>but God raised him up on the third day and made it possible for us to see him. <sup>41</sup>Not everyone was granted this privilege, only those of us whom God chose as witnesses. We actually ate and drank with him after his resurrection. <sup>42</sup>He told us to spread his message to everyone and to tell them that he is the One whom God has chosen to be judge, to make a just assessment of all people - both living and dead. <sup>43</sup>All the prophets tell us about him and assert that every person who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

<sup>44</sup>Peter wasn't planning to stop at this point, but he could go no further because the Holy Spirit suddenly interrupted and came upon all the people who were listening. <sup>45-46</sup>They began speaking in foreign languages (just as the Jewish disciples did on the Day of

Pentecost), and their hearts overflowed in joyful praises to God. Peter's friends from Joppa - all of them Jewish, all circumcised - were stunned to see that the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on Gentiles.

Peter: <sup>47</sup>Can anyone give any good reason not to [ceremonially wash] baptise these people as fellow disciples? After all, it's obvious they have received the Holy Spirit just as we did on the Day of Pentecost.

<sup>48</sup>So, he had them baptized in the name of Jesus the Liberating King. The new disciples asked him to stay for several more days.<sup>1</sup>

---

This should be easy.

We live in a land of diversity in a culture which welcomes plurality.

We are a people of opportunity who adhere to no rigid class structure and no harsh race stricture.

This welcoming of outsiders should be easy.

This acknowledging of God's gifts to all persons shouldn't be difficult.

It was difficult for Peter.

Peter had a lifetime of training and a rigorous religious upbringing.

Peter knew who he was because he ate kosher and kept Sabbath and was circumcised.

Then one day he dreamed and was never the same again.

That dream wasn't about animals and food. That vision was about the generosity of God's love and the wideness of God's compassion and the completion of God's claim on all peoples.

All those Gentiles - people without story or root - are different but not deficient.

They bring vitality to the community of faith.

You cannot follow Jesus without them.

---

<sup>1</sup>The Dust off their Feet: Lessons from the First Church. Chris Seay and friends. 2006  
Ecclesia Bible Society, pub. By Thomas Nelson, Inc. Nashville. Pp. 45-50.

Peter's old time religion never taught him that. But in the light of revelation, in the home of Gentiles, in a Roman military officer's house, surrounded by pig-eating, uncircumcised, sabbath-breaking Gentiles Peter found joy! Praise be to God.

Jesus started populating the kingdom of God with outsiders:

prodigals are there and prostitutes

scallywags are there and charlatans

lame and blind people are there and prisoners.

Widows are there and orphans.

All the outsiders nobody else wants are there because without those people, whatever it is, it is not the kingdom of God!

The churches in which I grew up did not know this truth. We subdivided into groups more and more like each other until we all become bland, boring copies of each other with little thoughts and tiny challenges and petty problems, when there was a whole world out there crying to hear some good news about living. While we were inside picking each other to death Jesus was out on the hillside breaking bread, gathering up strangers, welcoming children, eating with sinners, and sneaking off for some precious prayer time with God - turning the whole world upside down.

So, now, here's Peter: bold, impulsive, impetuous, bear-hugging, fish-catching, Jesus-loving, big-talking Peter having a vision that changed everything. Outside are three Gentile strangers: a soldier and a couple of slaves, saying, "Come with us," and he does.

Peter needed those strangers to stretch him in uncomfortable ways to more fully know God. He never knew he needed Gentiles to show him God before. Outsiders coming in opened the door for the light to shine in. That's what it's all about. Welcome and wonder. Overturning the old to give birth to the new. That's what church is for.

This can only happen in groups. Those who think they can worship perfectly well all alone are sadly mistaken. Not only do they miss the joys of Christian fellowship but they also miss the insights and prayers of friends. We need people who have strange ideas and sometimes ruffle our feathers and make us look at things differently. We need others who hold up a mirror to us and let us see ourselves even when it's painful. We need the community of Christ where people love each other because Christ loved us first and in that love we take the time and attentiveness to notice each other and understand each other and welcome each other.

When you think about it miracles happen in the group where the Spirit sings. Health

happens. Families flourish. Sin is stopped. Forgiveness flows. Reconciliation results. We cannot create it but we can be recreated in it. We need Gentiles in the church. We need prisoners and broken people, outsiders and hated people, poets and mystics and officers and slaves. We need animal rights activists and hunters. We need Democrats and Republicans and anarchists. We need straights and gays and transgendered persons and lesbians. We need rich people and poor ones, old people and young ones, white, black, red, brown and yellow ones. We need bald and hairy people and some with beards. We need fat people and skinny ones, happy people and sad ones because God says we're all beloved, we're all full of God's image and we're all made clean. That, my friends, is the Gospel. It changes the world.

When you think about one more thing it becomes fantastic. Faith is not accidental. We choose faith. Intentional faith is joining up with something bigger, older, wiser, more experienced than we are where we begin to see ourselves as part of God's great gospel plan for the overmaking of the earth. Who could be content with a little faith that has us at the center?

Peter dreamed a vision of a new earth. It was God's gift and it lifted the church from a future as a sect within Judaism into a global community of persons who follow Jesus into the ways of peace. Imagine such a dream. Imagine such a church. Ed McCurdy had a dream and wrote it into a song and that song has been translated into 76 languages and sung by dozens and dozens of artists famous and not. Oh, the power of a dream.

Last night I had the strangest dream I'd ever dreamed before<sup>2</sup>  
I dreamed the world had all agreed - To put an end to war  
I dreamed I saw a mighty room and the room was filled with men  
And the paper they were signing said - They'd never fight again.

And when the paper was all signed - And a million copies made  
They all joined hands and bowed their heads - And grateful pray'rs were prayed.  
And the people in the streets below - Were dancing 'round and 'round  
While swords and guns and uniforms - Were scattered on the ground

Last night I had the strangest dream - I'd never dreamed before

---

<sup>2</sup>Last Night I Had The Strangest Dream, Words and music by Ed McCurdy, TRO-©1950,1951 & 1955 Almanac Music, Inc., New York, N.Y.

I dreamed the world had all agreed - To put an end to war.

The world is changing. We all sense it and know it. Peter's dream is important. God is speaking. Peace is on the way. Imagine churches standing up and people lifting up eyes and hearts and hopes and working in the way of Jesus. What a dream!

<sup>1</sup>Meanwhile Saul,

still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord,  
went to the high priest

<sup>2</sup>and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus,  
so that if he found any who belonged to the Way,  
men or women,

he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

<sup>3</sup>Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus,  
suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.

<sup>4</sup>He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him,  
"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

<sup>5</sup>He asked,

"Who are you, Lord?"

The reply came,

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.

<sup>6</sup>But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."

<sup>7</sup>The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. <sup>8</sup>Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus.

<sup>9</sup>For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Thanks be to God that not everyone has to go through something like Saul. Thanks be to God that most of us have an easier path than getting knocked down, forced to look around and consider that we may have been on the wrong road and needed turning around. Thanks be to God that most of us are not so pig headed to require knocking the daylights out of us so that we can learn to see.

We don't all get blinded by the light. We don't all have our purpose and plan destroyed in some supernatural display of sound and sight.

But we all do get led, like children from danger, by the hand, into the embrace of the church where we can be fed and healed, and included in a new community of friends.

But then, we've not all been out ravaging the church:

breathing threats and murder,

becoming enemies of Jesus on our own search and destroy mission.

Saul understood very well how dangerous these followers of Jesus were to the old ways. Before he believed he grasped the core of the gospel of Jesus. And he hated it. It meant the end of life as he and his people for generations had known it. Jesus threatened old time religion and business as usual politics with his upside-down ideas about peace and mercy and finding God in the margins. Saul was out to save the world from Jesus. Jesus had other ideas.

The only thing some of us have in common with Saul on his road of destruction is that we have responded to Something... Someone... somehow -

and began to love God. We know what love feels like. We have come to see Jesus as the one who shows us God better than most. We reach out and call him Lord. And he reaches back. Whether it happens in a heartbeat or over the decades everything is changed. We lose the violence and find peace. We leave behind the greed, lust, gluttony, wrath and pride of the past and put on compassion, mercy, forgiveness and joy. We have a word that transformation. We call it conversion. We call it grace. We come into the church and, under the influence of the gospel and with the help of friends, we are converted from the old to the new. We don't come to join a group. We come to have our lives transformed. Thanks be to God that the good news of Jesus is the life transforming business!

If you've had a prayer answered,  
if you've come to see yourself in a more healthy way,  
if you've received power to heal a relationship, overcome an addiction,  
undertake a mission,  
if you've ever sang with a quickened pulse that line from the hymn because you know what it means, "I once was lost but now I'm found", then you know what I'm talking about.

If you love Jesus because you have a one-on-one relationship with him and he has changed your life, then you understand why he attracts us.

But... if you've seen the light and it frightened you, if it disgusted you, if it repelled you and you needed to draw back from all that love, peace and joy because it just didn't ring true for you then you understand Paul on the road to Damascus breathing threats and murder, arrest warrants in hand, and Christians in his sights. When we're in the hurt and under the grip of fear

the road to peace looks threatening and false. But it isn't. Saul had to be blinded before he could see. Sometimes so do we.

Conversion is always about leaving something behind and taking up something new. Saving Saul for new purposes meant he had to leave the religion of his youth. He had to leave the mission of his life. He had to leave the priests and teachers of his upbringing. He had to leave the friends of his heart and the routines which held his life together. What he got in return was a new faith that didn't even have a name yet, a bunch of Gentiles for friends, some ex-tax collectors and fisher folk apostles for instructors. He got a new community of support - people who feared and distrusted him and kept checking to see if he still had those arrest warrants in his back pocket. What he got was a whole new way of living. He'd trained as a lawyer, a crack one at that. But he'd become a tentmaker to earn enough money to put food on the table while he went about his real business: talking to people about God's new initiative: sending Jesus, the Holy Son, the Easter King, the world's savior who has a new message. Love one another. Include one another. God is at work, get with it!

He took that message of Jesus to the Gentiles.

He took it to the Jews.

He took it to kings and governors.

He preached it in the cities and he sang it in the jails.

He started churches and wrote letters back to those believers encouraging, instructing, cajoling, chastising, imagining how it is when we learn to love each other, how it is when we care for each other, how it is when we lean into God and pray for each other, how it is when we don't return hate for hate, how it is when we trade revenge for forgiving love, how it is when we

become part of God's work in healing the world. It's a new thing.

People heard the message and said, "Yes!"

It takes your breath away!

They took Saul into the church in Damascus and the people he'd set out to destroy prayed for and with him. They restored vision to him. They fed and nurtured him. They became the community of grace for him. They prepared him to go out into the cities to share with Gentiles and Jews, rulers and slaves, other Christians and old-line pagans the good news of Jesus. God is love. Life is holy. Peace is possible. You can gaze into the light and not be blinded.

When we see the light it is for a purpose. Paul got knocked down so he could look around for a mission God had in mind. It's no different with us. God shapes our hearts for a reason. We become that someone, that somehow, that something necessary to someone else stumbling blindly on the road to destruction. We carry good news like water to someone who is dying of thirst. We become the servant people of compassion who care about people who have lost their homes, who don't have the necessary medical care, who are alone and adrift in depression. We become intentional Christians who follow Jesus because we have decided to and have been invited to and the Spirit fills us. The community of the congregation nourishes us. And we go out to live as Jesus people, practicing faith in the boldest, most joyous of ways. Thanks be to Jesus for opening the path. This, my friends, is the gospel!

## Grace on Trial 4-27-2008

By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

It may not be immediately apparent, but the truth is, the impact of this one chapter in the book of Acts - this story of conflict in the early church - is huge! The decision made by the Jerusalem council set Christianity on a trajectory that has informed the generations since as we, like those believers in Acts, seek to be faithful to the way of Jesus.

In order to understand this story, it is important to remember that it takes place soon after Jesus has died and risen. At this point, most people who followed Jesus were, like Jesus himself, Jewish. Jesus was well schooled in Hebrew scripture and custom. His purpose was not to start a new religion. Rather, he was a prophet to his people, believed to be the messiah, the promised one of God who was to usher in a reign of justice and peace as foretold in scripture.

Well, that's all fine and good, except that Jesus' message was bigger than Judaism. People who were not Jews heard the message of Jesus and, indeed, found a truth and a saving grace that transformed their lives. And they wanted to join in the fellowship of believers as followers of the way of Jesus. The tension in this story is over what is required of those who would follow Jesus.

Tradition would suggest that they should first become Jews. That is why the question before the Jerusalem council is about circumcision. In the book of *Genesis*, the first book in scripture, God makes a covenant with Abraham. Part of that covenant is that every male shall be circumcised. Circumcision is a sign of the covenant between God and God's people. So you see, the need to be circumcised is based in scripture and tradition, and, at this point, had probably never been questioned. Today, we may wonder, "What's the big deal?" But this was a huge issue. Can a person be part of the community of

believers without first following the law and custom of the religious tradition that brought forth Jesus?

Have you ever come to a point in your life where it is clear that you are at a crossroads and you have to decide a direction and you know that the rest of your life will follow from that one decision in ways you do not know? The early church was at a crossroads. People, lots of people, were hearing the good news of Jesus Christ, were recognizing the saving grace of that truth, and were giving their lives to living in that way. The council had to decide, "Are we going to require that followers of Jesus first become Jewish, or do we see that there is something bigger going on here... that, through Jesus, God is widening the circle and doing a new thing and so, in faith, we can eliminate some of the barriers to faith in Christ.

Well, as the story goes, this created much discussion and debate among the leaders. I love the language of the New Revised Standard Version when it says, "Paul and Barnabus had *no small dissension and*

*debate* with them..." I'm sure that is an understatement! Paul and Barnabus were on the road, traveling from town to town spreading the good news of Jesus' to all kinds of people. They saw with their own eyes how God was at work in and through these so called, Gentiles. They had worked so hard to expand and widen the liberating power of Jesus' message and way of life, and now that was being threatened by those , like the Pharisees who wanted to make sure the law was being followed along the way. On the other hand, the Pharisees, I'm sure, thought they were being guardians of the faith and didn't want to see an "anything goes" attitude toward something so important.

There you have the two sides of the issue. So how does it get resolved? You have scripture and tradition on one side and you have experience and a sense of the way Jesus is leading on the other. Rather than get into a theoretical or philosophical discussion, the leaders look at the evidence. They hear the testimony of Paul and Barnabus who report that as they spread the word about Jesus, they

witness the power at work in those who believe; they see how the Holy Spirit is poured out on the *Gentiles* just as it is upon the *Jews*, and they are amazed by all the signs and wonders that *God* is doing in and through the *Gentiles*. The weight of that kind of evidence carries the day. And the liberating message of *Jesus* is shared freely among people near and far, to different races and genders and classes. And a movement takes off on an ever widening path.

But, as you know, that is not the end of the story. The church has come to these kinds of crossroads many times in its history, just with different issues. In the last two hundred years or so I can think of several such crossroads. The direction to go at these crossroads, however, were decided in messy ways over the course of time by various manifestations of the church, without the benefit of general agreement among all who call themselves *Christian*. These issues include slavery, the role of women in the church, and homosexuality.

These, like the issue of circumcision, have caused "*no small dissension and debate*" within the community of believers called church. These, like the issue of circumcision, find scripture and tradition on one side, and experience and a sense of the way Jesus is leading on the other. And these, like the issue of circumcision, require looking at the evidence and where the activity of the Holy Spirit might be found in order to come to some resolution.

When the issue of slavery was being debated in this country, people on both sides of the issue used the bible to make their case. The Bible does not, in any particular verse, condemn slavery. In fact, in several places, it takes slavery as a given and offers instructions on conduct to both slave owner and slave. Yet, today, it seems absolutely abhorrent to us that anyone would be considered property to be bought and sold and treated as less than fully human. That sensibility, too, comes from scripture, not from any one verse, but from the spirit that flows through it, particularly the life and teachings of Jesus. How

can you love your neighbor as yourself and yet claim them as property? That is inconceivable. Over time, that spirit held sway, and the church became clear and united in its opposition to slavery. Chapter two of that story, as we all know, continued in the struggle for equal rights and respect for those formerly held as slaves and their descendants.

Another issue is the role of women in the church. That has created "*no small dissension and debate*" within the church as well. And it is a debate which continues in many circles. But in this denomination, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), along with all the other mainline denominations, we have resolved the issue - at least in principal, if not in practice, and women are granted the same powers and responsibilities as men. To get there, we had to hear the side of scripture and tradition, as well as consider experience and a sense of the way Jesus is leading. Both sides of this issue use scripture to base their understanding and belief. On the one side you have those who quote, "women should be silent in the churches." (I Cor.14:34) While

the other quotes, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3:28)

So how did we resolve that issue? In the same way circumcision was resolved. There was dialogue and debate among the leaders, including testimony about the amazing things God was doing in and through women and how the Holy Spirit was being poured out upon women just like men, and how signs and wonders were made manifest because of the wideness of how God works. And, at least for some communities of faith within Christianity, the leadership of women has been embraced allowing the church to spread the good news in different ways, more fully embodying God's grace for all people without regard for what we look like or what body parts we came with.

You see, we worship a God who is so big that, much as we try, we cannot limit how or through whom God will work. We cannot limit the wonderful grace and redeeming love that flows so freely to all who will

receive it. Sure, we can set up barriers and limitations, and the history of Christianity is full of examples of doing just that. But God's spirit continues to work among us and surprise us and teach us and guide us. And we, as church, continue to dialogue and debate the big issues in love and respect, in prayer for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, sensing the way Jesus leads, all the while looking for signs and wonders, ready to be amazed by just how wide is God's grace and mercy and love.

God's grace continues to push us and stretch us and transform us and humble us. Scripture and tradition are important voices in any decision, but this story in Acts shows us that we must also pay attention to what God is doing here and now, and allow ourselves to be open to the movement of the Holy Spirit. So I guess what that really means is that deep within scripture and tradition is the practice of being led by God in new directions to new horizons far beyond what we once could imagine. My, how vast is God's grace! Thanks be to God. Amen.

<sup>1</sup>One day, on our way to the place of prayer, a slave girl ran into us.

She was a psychic and, with her fortune telling, made a lot of money for the people who owned her. She started following Paul around, calling everyone's attention to us by yelling out:

"These men are working for the Most High God!

They're laying out the road of salvation for you!"

She did this for a number of days until Paul, finally fed up with her, turned and commanded the spirit that possessed her,

"Out! In the name of Jesus Christ, get out of her!"

And it was gone, just like that.

When her owners saw that their lucrative little business was suddenly bankrupt, they went after Paul and Silas, roughed them up and dragged them into the market square.

Then the police arrested them and pulled them into a court with the accusation,

"These men are disturbing the peace - dangerous Jewish agitators subverting our Roman law and order."

By this time the crowd had turned into a restless mob out for blood.

The judges went along with the mob, had Paul and Silas's clothes ripped off and ordered a public beating. After beating them black-and-blue, they threw them into jail, telling the jailkeeper to put them under heavy guard so there would be no chance of escape. He did just that - threw them into the maximum security cell in the jail and clamped leg irons on them.

Along about midnight, Paul and Silas were at prayer and singing a robust hymn to God.

The other prisoners couldn't believe their ears. Then, without warning, a huge

---

<sup>1</sup>The Message, paraphrased by Eugene H. Peterson, Navpress, Colorado Springs, CO, 1995, pp. 277-f.

earthquake! The jailhouse tottered, every door flew open, all the prisoners were loose.

Startled from sleep, the jailer saw all the doors swinging loose on their hinges. Assuming that all the prisoners had escaped, he pulled out his sword and was about to do himself in, figuring he was as good as dead anyway, when Paul stopped him.

"Don't do that! We're all still here! Nobody's run away!"

The jailer got a torch and ran inside. Badly shaken, he collapsed in front of Paul and Silas. He led them out of the jail and asked,

"Sirs, what do I have to do to be saved, to really live?"

They said,

"Put your entire trust in the Master Jesus. Then you'll live as you were meant to live - and everyone in your house included!"

They went on to spell out in detail the story of the Master - the entire family got in on this part. They never did get to bed that night. The jailer made them feel at home, dressed their wounds, and then - he couldn't wait till morning! - was baptized, he and everyone in his family. There in his home, he had food set out for a festive meal. It was a night to remember: He and his entire family had put their trust in God; everyone in the house was in on the celebration.

At daybreak, the court judges sent officers with the instructions,

"Release these men."

The jailer gave Paul the message,

"The judges sent word that you're free to go on your way. Congratulations! Go in peace!"

But Paul wouldn't budge. He told the officers,

"They beat us up in public and threw us in jail, Roman citizens in good standing! And now they want to get us out of the way on the sly without anyone knowing?"

Nothing doing! If they want us out of here, let them come themselves and lead us out in broad daylight."

When the officers reported this, the judges panicked. They had no idea that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens. They hurried over and apologized, personally escorted them from the jail, and then asked them if they wouldn't please leave the city.

### Choir sings anthem: Paul and Silas

Paul and Silas began to shout. The jail doors opened and they walked out.

Hold on. Hold on. Keep your eyes on the prize. Hold on!

We've fought jail and violence too, and God's love has seen us through.

Hold on. Hold on. Keep your eyes on the prize. Hold on!

When we take Jesus as seriously as Paul and Silas did we will face the same kind of opposition, misunderstanding, retribution and need-to-walk-by-faith that they did. If we believe that Jesus has the answers to the world's problems and take action on those beliefs, we will need faith that heals, that overcomes jails, and that does not cower in fear before opposition. If we understand that we are bearers of the best news in the world then we have a message to share and people will respond and baptisms will be celebrated. Not much in our past history has prepared us for witness in the post-modern world. Much of scripture, from the pre-modern world, speaks to us in powerful, new ways now. Thanks be to God!

Paul didn't mean to set off a chain of unintended consequences when he healed the slave girl. All he and Silas wanted was to start a new church in Philippi, Greece. We know the church survived. We have one of his letters, written later from another jail: the Letter to the Philippians, in the New Testament. Maybe the slave girl joined that church. The jailer's family were charter members.

But her owners, who saw their cash cow go dry when Paul healed her made a huge deal of it, whipped up a riot, called in the cops, had these two Jewish outsiders hauled into court, got the judges on their side. It was the Chamber of Commerce verses outside agitators. The judges had Paul and Silas stripped naked and beat with rods. The message was clear: "Do not mess with us. We'll bring the power of Rome down on you." Intimidation was the intent. Put Paul in his place. Place him in jail. Shackle his legs so he can't even move so he can sit in the dark, with the rats, feeling every blow, thinking about how badly his body hurts, and be broken in spirit. Jail and torture often go together. How many stories out of South Africa and Central America and Northern Ireland have we heard - and the Middle East - go up against business interests and government policy and you disappear or you die.

Paul and Silas had a choice. Jail gets things melted down to the elemental factors. They could have screamed all night in pain and rage. They could have tried to convince everyone of their innocence. They could have let hate get hold of their hearts. But they broke out in rhythm and praise. Not blues, praise. They're in there singing, "Gonna Love My Jesus" and "How Great Thou Art" and the other prisoners are tapping toes and clapping hands. Not bad for jailhouse rock. They changed the atmosphere in the place. Love casts out fear. God is bigger than jail. Freedom in the heart thrives when the world gets narrowed down to a 6 X 8 foot room. Think about how many great things have been written from jail:

- Paul's letters - where he says, "I wish you all could be just like I am, oh, except for these chains!"
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote books that changed the world from jail as he awaited death.
- Ghandi wrote from jail and broke down the British.
- Martin Luther wrote from jail and fueled a reformation.
- Martin Luther King wrote from a Birmingham jail and woke up a nation.
- Eldridge Cleaver wrote from jail a transformation from fear and hate to love.

- Charles Coalson wrote from jail a story of faith that opened a world to thousands.
- Caesar Chavez and Rosa Parks went to jail for the sake of justice and moved a people.

Anne Feeney wrote a song singing,

"If you've been to jail for justice You're in good company.

Have you been to jail for justice?

I want to shake your hand - 'Cause sitting in and laying down are ways to take a stand.

Have you sung a song for freedom or marched that picket line?

Have you been to jail for justice? Then you're a friend of mine."

When you're alive in the Holy Spirit you're okay.

When you're in jail for justice or Jesus you're okay.

When you're innocent and hated, persecuted and reviled, you're okay.

When catastrophe comes and you suffer some disease, some injustice, some horrible thing, you're okay.

God sees to that.

They can kill your body but not your soul.

Beat you and throw you away, knock you down or hang you up, and still, you're okay.

God sees to that.

Next time trouble comes, remember Paul and Silas singing in the cell and remember whose you are. Take hold of love. Live in the light. Even when it's dark. You're okay.

God shook the place up and set the prisoners free, just like Jesus said, like God is always doing. Remember Nelson Mandela?

There the jailbirds sat, choir practice was not over. Darth Vader, the warden, rushed in, fearing the worse, was about to kill himself before his bosses could strip and whip him and take their time killing him, but,

- by the love of God which transforms the world,
- by the power of Jesus whose death gives life,
- by the faith of prisoners that changed a jail into a church,
- by the witness of Christians who refused to be intimidated, who refused to return hatred for hatred, who refused to moan and groan but instead kept their eyes on the prize -- had that jailer in a come-to-Jesus moment.

He took Paul and Silas home.

He nursed their wounds.

He gathered in his whole family to hear the story. Pretty soon they were all singing, "All the Way My Savior Leads Me" and before the sun came up they're having a baptismal service.

None of it would have happened if Paul and Silas weren't so in love with Jesus.

It never could have happened if they gave in to fear and hate.

They blessed their persecutors.

They rejoiced because now God had a chance to transform the world.

They walked by faith - or limped! - and look at what happened.

Paul and Silas were Roman citizens. It was illegal to treat citizens the way those judges treated them. Even in that brutal world there were limits. They tried a cover-up. Paul wouldn't have it. He demanded an apology. He didn't make threats. He didn't call the terrorists to bomb their houses. Paul and Silas went back outside the city, back to the story that goes before this one, back to the little group of people who loved Jesus where they'd met for prayer and praise, back into the embrace of the church.

Out in the world you get busted and beat. You get knocked down and locked up. But, back in the company of the committed, back with those who love Jesus more than life, you get healed and loved. It is enough. You become part of God's great rocking the jails and shaking the powers transformation of the world. Thanks be to God!

## Earth, Wind, and Fire - Pentecost 5-11-08

By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

A mighty wind has blown..... I don't know about you, but it wasn't my alarm clock that woke me up this morning. It was the sound of a mighty wind blowing. Living in Iowa, we have probably all experienced some very windy days - the kind of wind that causes trees to bend. I'll never forget a terrible wind storm that came up one night when my family and I were sleeping. When we looked outside the next morning our trampoline had blown right into one of our cars and completely smashed the rear window! Now that was a mighty wind!

I'll also never forget the time when my husband, Tim, and I were sitting at the table and all of a sudden, one of those funnel winds came through our backyard. That wind took hold of our Christmas tree left from the previous Christmas, shot it straight up in the air 15-20 feet and then threw it another 50 feet. We stood and watched the whole thing happen. It was amazing - the power of that wind. Wind is a powerful force. People all across the Midwest, in Iowa, Illinois,

Missouri, and Kansas... know all too well about how mighty is the wind, particularly in the aftermath of a tornado that leaves such chaos in its path.

A mighty wind has blown..... Our story this morning is from the second chapter of Acts. Acts picks up the story of Jesus and his followers after his crucifixion, death, and resurrection. In chapter 1, Jesus is among his followers instructing them. Then, just before he ascends into heaven, Jesus tells his followers that they will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them. As they wait, they devote themselves to prayer; to listening for God.

That's where our story begins today. Jesus has ascended into heaven, his followers are gathered together in Jerusalem, "and suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting." And if that weren't amazing enough, tongues of fire begin to dance on them and they were filled with the Holy Spirit - just as Jesus had promised. A mighty wind has blown and tongues of fire have danced! The

awesome power of the Holy Spirit - that's what Jesus promised. That's what happened at Pentecost. That's what we pray happens today. Let there be no doubt that Christians are powered by the Spirit, just as a windmill is powered by the wind. But what kind of power is this?

The second chapter of Acts tries to answer to that question. This one chapter speaks volumes about what happens when people are powered by the wind of the Holy Spirit. The power of wind moves things. It is the opposite of calm or static. When the wind blows, there is a stirring, a flurry, motion, action. When it is the mighty wind of the Holy Spirit, things move in the direction of God. And that wind, like in my examples earlier, is powerful, but is neither predictable nor controllable. It does change things and get them moving, however.

A mighty wind has blown and tongues of fire have danced! Do you remember the first thing that happened after Jesus' followers were filled with the Holy Spirit? They began both speaking in the languages of the various people who had gathered in Jerusalem as well as hearing others in their own language. And all were amazed that each person

could understand in their own native tongue. The mighty wind of the Holy Spirit is powerful enough to remove barriers. Language is one of the many barriers to understanding and unity. That these followers of Jesus could speak to people of many different languages was a powerful testimony to the fact that Jesus came to preach the good news to all of God's children, no matter where they were from. Peter confirms this notion that the message of Jesus has the power to bring down barriers between people. Peter reads from the prophet Joel who speaks of God's vision of sons and daughters and old people and slaves alike filled with God's spirit and prophesying of God's goodness. Peter tells the crowd, "For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls."

As the Apostle Paul writes, "in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between." (Eph.2:13,14)

The power of the Holy Spirit is the awesome power to overcome the

obstacles, barriers, and divisions that exist between people and which also separate us from God. It happened on the day of Pentecost. And it has continued to happen through the history of God's people.

Strangers are friends, those far off are brought near, unity happens even in the midst of great diversity. That is the mighty power of the Holy Spirit.

A mighty wind has blown and tongues of fire have danced! After the barriers between people came down, they were able to hear Peter's message and believe in the power of God through Jesus Christ. The power of the Holy Spirit moved people to see and to believe with the eyes of faith. The power of the Holy Spirit moved people from accepting things as they seem to be according to the world's standards, or as Peter put it, "from this corrupt generation" to see from God's point of view. The power of the Holy Spirit is the power of new sight. And, we are told, the power of the Holy Spirit generated new sight in 3,000 people on the day of Pentecost. It is the same spirit that has continued to move, giving new sight, throughout the centuries.

A mighty wind has blown and tongues of fire have danced. The power of the Holy Spirit moved people to act differently. After filling Jesus' followers, both old and new, taking down the barriers between people, giving faith and new sight, the Holy Spirit continued to power the actions of the people. It gave people the power to follow through with their new life as followers of Jesus, as children of God. This was reflected in all aspects of their lives. The apostles were able to perform signs and wonders. All those who believed became a new community; a community of justice where everyone had enough and no one had more than they needed; a community that gave to the poor and cared for one another. And, of course, a community that kept their spiritual center as they gathered together for worship, teaching and learning, fellowship and eating, and which was vigilant in prayer, deep listening prayer.

We live in times when there are many forces out there vying for our attention. There are many powers trying to engage us. It is easy to become bewildered and confused. Acts 2 reminds us that we have

access to a great power; a power strong enough to break down any barriers between people and between people and God; a power strong enough to give us new sight; a power strong enough to move us to act as God's beloved children, in love and thanksgiving, in communities of faith and justice, sharing in the practices of our faith and serving others with "glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people." With all the hopelessness and despair and sense of futility in the world, it takes an awesome power to move us to see and believe and act as followers of Jesus Christ. But that is just what Jesus promises.

A mighty wind has blown and tongues of fire have danced! The power of wind moves things. When the wind blows, there is a stirring, a flurry, motion, action. When it is the mighty wind of the Holy Spirit, things move in the direction of God.

Lois is going to play some music, during which I invite you to prayerfully listen to God and reflect on areas in your life or your faith or this congregation that may need the power of the Holy Spirit to

remove barriers, to give new sight, and move you to act. You may want to write down your thoughts on the piece of orange paper in your bulletin and put it in your Bible or on your refrigerator and continue to offer it in prayer to God. After a time for reflection and prayer, we will read responsively the Pentecost Prayer found on page #240 in the hymnal. Come, Holy Spirit, Come!

**May 18, 2008**

**A Eunuch Idea**

**Acts 9:26-40**

<sup>26</sup>During his time preaching in Samaria, an angel brought this short message from the Lord to Philip:

**Angel:** Leave Samaria. Go south to the Jerusalem-Gaza road.

That was the whole message. It was especially unusual because this road runs through the middle of the uninhabited desert. <sup>27</sup>But Philip got up, left the excitement of Samaria, and did as he was told to do. Along this road, Philip saw a chariot in the distance.

In the chariot was a dignitary from Ethiopia (the treasurer for Queen Candace), an African man who had been castrated. He had gone north to Jerusalem to worship at the Jewish temple, <sup>28</sup>and he was now heading southwest on his way home. He was seated in the chariot and was reading aloud from a scroll of the prophet Isaiah.

<sup>29</sup>Philip received another prompting from the Holy Spirit:

**Holy Spirit:** Go over to the chariot and climb on board.

<sup>30</sup>So he started running until he was even with the chariot. Philip heard the Ethiopian reading aloud and recognized the words from the prophet Isaiah.

**Philip:** Do you understand the meaning of what you're reading?

**Ethiopian:** <sup>31</sup>How can I understand it unless I have a mentor?

Then he invited Philip to sit in the chariot. <sup>32</sup>Here's the passage he was reading from the Hebrew Scriptures:

Like a sheep, he was led to be slaughtered.

Like a lamb, about to be shorn of its wool, he was completely silent.

<sup>33</sup>He was humiliated, and he received no justice.

Who can describe his peers? Who would treat him this way?

For they snuffed out his life.

**Ethiopian:** <sup>34</sup>Here's my first question. Is the prophet describing his own situation, or is he describing someone else's calamity?

<sup>35</sup>That began a conversation in which Philip used the passage to explain the good news of Jesus. <sup>36</sup>Eventually, the chariot passed a body of water beside the road.

**Ethiopian:** Since there is water here, is there anything that might prevent me from being baptized and identified as a disciple of Jesus? [the official may have been referring to the prohibition in Judaism from participating in temple worship against men like himself, ones who had been castrated - a prohibition he would likely have encountered in this visit to Jerusalem.]

**Philip:** <sup>37</sup>If you believe in your heart that Jesus is the Liberating King, then nothing can stop you.

The Ethiopian said that he believed. <sup>38</sup>He commanded the charioteer to stop the horses. Then Philip and the Ethiopian official walked together into water. There Philip immersed him, initiating him as a fellow disciple. <sup>39</sup>When they came out of the water, Philip was immediately caught up by the Holy Spirit and taken from the sight of the Ethiopian, who climbed back into his chariot and continued on his journey, overflowing with joy. <sup>40</sup>Philip found himself at a town called Azotus (formerly the Philistine capital city of Ashdod, on the Mediterranean), and from there he traveled north again, proclaiming the good news in town after town until he came to Caesarea.

The Holy Spirit should be the one who decides who can be in and who must be out of the fellowship. And those who are in the fellowship need to be in sufficient relationship with the Holy Spirit that they can welcome those who may be sent.

After Saul was struck down on the Damascus Road the people in the fellowship had trouble accepting the man who'd been so intent on persecuting them. They argued and struggled and heard each other out. Those who wanted to reject Saul certainly had good points to make. So did those who wanted to accept him. So they prayed and welcomed and taught him.

After Peter saw Gentiles receive the Holy Spirit he had to go against all his religious upbringing and welcome them into the fellowship despite the fact that they didn't observe Sabbath, keep kosher, or undergo circumcision. This was not easy for him. Even in his dream it took three times of refusing the God's command to eat non kosher foods. When he sat down at those Gentile tables of fellowship I'm sure he looked at some of that food offered him and felt a revolt in his stomach and a sense of foreboding. Listening to the Holy Spirit is hard, arduous work.

When the Holy Spirit is blowing free and flaming in hearts we will always who have a problem. God knocks down barriers and widens the welcome. It's the old stress of new wine in the old containers - the fermentation stretches the brittle and breaks it. We don't like having to admit that the way we've always thought might not be big enough. It's hard and uncertain work. We have no sure way of knowing if something is of God or whether it's some crazy notion that will amount to nothing.

Living by faith is not for sissies. And it's not for those who are too quick to run to the book of regulations to determine who should be in and who should be out.

There were probably some back at the temple who would shut the door in the fact of the Ethiopian, not because he was from the far corners of the earth, not because his skin

was as black as ebony, but because he was a eunuch. Deuteronomy 23:1 plainly says, "a man whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall not be admitted to the assembly of the Lord."

Rule or welcome? Exclusion or inclusion?

How in the world can we tell what is of God and what isn't?

Mostly we have to look to Jesus. And Jesus, 100% of the time, amazingly, chose the path of compassion, the open way of welcome. The way to Jesus is wide even if difficult.

He opened the way for the woman at the well despite the condemnation society had given her.

He declared salvation for Zacchaeus the tax collector despite the hatred his own people had given him.

He praised the woman who anointed him with perfume and wept for him shortly before his death despite the censure the Pharisees and even his own disciples gave her.

He talked about a hated Samaritan extending hospitality to a Jewish man robbed and left for dead on the side of the road, when fellow Jews had passed him by.

He extended forgiveness to a woman caught in adultery and about to be executed despite the religious rules demanding her death.

He healed the child of a Roman officer in spite of the cries of his own people who would have loved to see the child die to bring misery to the house of their enemy.

It is so tempting to live a righteous life and avoid sin and get to thinking that we are in fellowship with God and therefore have enough understanding to know who we, and God, consider to be out. Of course we want to lead a moral and upright life. Of course we want to walk with God. If we stop there, however, we end up being the elder brother in the Prodigal Son story of Jesus or like the Pharisee in the temple who spent his prayer time being grateful that he wasn't like the tax collector standing over in the corner pleading for mercy.

Philip, riding in the chariot at high noon, across the desert with a stranger declared that the prophecy the Ethiopian was reading, and not understanding, had a particular meaning.

You just can't get to deep religious truth by reading it in a book, even the Bible. Without the history of interpretation and the help of a mentor we don't know how to understand the words that we read. So we get bored or frustrated or both. We need an interpreter. In this church that's Mary Jane's and my job - to study the text and interpretation and to teach and preach that the Holy Spirit can work in our midst so the gospel can be unhindered. It's never something we take lightly.

Was Isaiah talking about himself or pointing to someone else when he wrote his metaphor about a sheep being slaughtered, a lamb being shorn, a victim of injustice robbed of life? The Ethiopian may have understood everything he needed to know about running the treasury and getting along with the Queen but he had no way of knowing what Isaiah was talking about. Deacon Philip knew. Philip said the passage points to Jesus. Jesus who widens the circle of fellowship and welcomes all who are lost, counted as least, and find themselves last in the line of redemption - has a word for people who are cut off and cast out. "Come on in! You have a place here because God has given you a name and a promise and a hope."

All that sounds so good to the outsiders. They flock in droves because it is clearly good news. You were once far away and you were once a stranger. But now you are brought

close. Now you have a welcome. It's the gospel truth.

But to those who are already in, sometimes the eunuchs and adulterers, sometimes the enemies and strangers, sometimes the foreigners and poor stretch us and make us reconsider. Sometimes we feel like the old wineskin, about to burst when all we've ever done is our job of holding wine and this new wine is too much. Sometimes we'd like to shut our eyes and wish all those different, gentile, difficult people with all their problems would just go away. But they won't.

Thanks be to God for that! Just because they are different does not mean they are deficient. Any decent church fellowship ought to have Ethiopians and Jews, people with tattoos and body piercings and skinheads, it ought to have straight-laced folk who know very well the rules and traditions and also the free-lancing, fancy-free who know very well the joys of the Holy Spirit. Of course they will be in tension with each other. That's the creative edge by which the Holy Spirit redeems us all.

What's the alternative? To become small and frightened? To become hide bound and rejecting? Where is the gospel in that?

In this house of prayer for all peoples let us resolve to be also a people of welcome for all peoples, trusting that the Holy Spirit will lead and guide. In our debates and discussions let us opt for compassion after the fashion of Jesus for we may be entertaining angels and those we welcome may become our teachers. How wide is God's grace? I suppose it goes clear to Ethiopia and Jerusalem and to the pools of baptism. Thanks be to God for that!

May 25, 2008

On the Road Again

Acts 28:16-31

It's the end of the road for our Acts Action Adventure series. We've watched Peter, Paul, Philip and others crossing land and sea, over cultures and countries taking the good news for every person that Jesus has something important - that he changes everything - that a revolution is quietly going on in the middle of the Roman Empire

- a revolution of love,
- a gathering of hope,
- a vision of justice,
- a way of walking by faith that results in peace.

And here is Paul, at the end of the book, locked up in Rome, under house arrest - awaiting trial for crimes he didn't commit. He will be killed soon for those non-crimes. He's not complaining. He's receiving visitors who stream to him, talking about his passions: Jesus who died to show people how to live and God who loves so people don't have to hate.

But how? How do you explain a man who sets out to destroy followers of the Way - arrest warrants in hand and hate in his heart - who gets turned around by a vision of Jesus that blinds him? How can you account for a man who ends up locked up for the sake of the one he'd hated? How could anyone possibly explain a lawyer at the top of his class, who'd endure public beatings, death-threats, repeated jailings, disagreements with his own people and misunderstandings with Gentiles?

Everyone admits he was brilliant. How could someone so smart trade a

lawyer's life of comfort and wealth for a life in which the only courtrooms he'd enter would be hostile, where he'd not be wearing a robe of power but the chains of a prisoner? How could he trade prestige for poverty and privilege for deprivation? How could a practicing Jew, conservative to the core, end up outside his faith, liberal in theology, eating non-kosher foods with Gentiles, and telling pagans and atheists, agnostics and other Jews about how God sent Jesus

- to point a path that heals broken people,
- that reconciles enemies,
- that welcomes outcasts,
- that creates communities of love where everybody is served and everybody serves.

Paul could have had it so easy but he chose a path that made his life so difficult. How could a man do that?

Tomorrow US citizens all over the world remember. We'll go to cemeteries and ceremonies. We'll march in parades and listen to speeches. Some of us will remember the telegram or the chaplain in uniform who came, early in the morning, knocking at the door. Some of us will pull out that ancient black-bordered envelope and weep old tears afresh. Some of us will look down those long straight rows of white markers, marching as far as the eye can see, over the gentle sweep of a national cemetery and we'll remember.

We'll reflect on why those people died as they did. Memorial Day. Life traded for something else. Debts owed and paid. Sacrifice.

Some of them were heroes and some of them were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Some of them were victims of an accident and some of them sacrificed themselves so their buddies could have a chance. Some of them believed with everything in them that their own life was a small price to pay for others to have life - and they thought they could make a difference.

Sometimes we look at those graves, so many of them, and the people who wore the uniforms and did the work and we are overcome with the gravity of it. We are filled with gratitude for it. We see greatness in it. They made a difference. They make a difference.

In the light of their sacrifices we can understand a visionary like Paul. He makes a difference in their lives and ours. He'd have nothing to do with coasting through life, taking the course of least resistance, making money but not making a difference. He'd have nothing to do with consuming greed or cowering cowardice. He was the one who cried: "It's no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me." He wrote in one of his letters, long missives when a single letter might take weeks to write and cost hundreds of dollars to deliver, "I wish you could all be just like me... oh, except for these chains." He knew hunger and cold and poverty and hatred and injustice for the sake of creating communities of people who followed Jesus in the cities of the Empire so people could live with love and grace and forgiveness and joy - at peace with each other and with God.

Sometimes we look at Paul out there taking to the roads of the Roman Empire, a citizen of the Empire and a lover of the Jews and dismiss him all

too easily. We say he's too difficult to understand. He's too fixated on arguments. He's too hounded by his enemies that he's grown calluses on his soul. Maybe so. But there's another way we could be thinking about Paul the apostle who started out as Saul the destroyer. We could be noticing how he held up a way of getting right with God that puts first the things that Jesus put first: loving God, loving your neighbor, seeking justice, walking in faith, rejecting violence as the solution to problems, taking up servanthood, taking up a cross, humbly following a Master who holds the keys to life,

- life in all its abundance,
- life brimming over with joy,
- life that makes a difference,
- life that counts for something even if it is the most difficult, uncomfortable way of living imaginable.

Paul lived in a world where most people who'd heard of Jesus thought badly of him. They saw in him a threat to the world order based on dominance.

- If slaves followed Jesus they'd be dreaming freedom.
- If outsiders loved Jesus they'd be claiming a place at the table of prosperity.
- If women followed Jesus they'd be unwilling to submit to servitude.
- If Jews followed Jesus they'd be going against tradition and old time religion.
- If Romans followed Jesus they'd be going against the Empire and old time patriotism.
- If Greeks followed Jesus they'd be going against the golden mean that takes everything in moderation till the passion is squeezed out of life

and nothing is left worth dying for.

In that world where Jesus was so mistrusted and viewed with suspicion in city after city there grew up little groups of followers who'd gather before sunrise, who'd meet in cemeteries where superstitious Romans feared to go, for worship. They'd pray and praise God. They'd study scripture and learn of Jesus. They'd look out for each other to make sure everybody had enough. They'd die with a hymn on their lips because dying with Jesus in your heart is better than living without him.

When Paul went out onto the roads leading out from Rome he was passionate about Christ Jesus. He thought if everybody could listen to Jesus they'd not have to create wars or live in fear or be beat down for the sake of somebody else's gain. They'd live in joy and peace.

People out in the world still misunderstand Jesus. They still regard him with suspicion. People who follow him wonder why - when it's so good living without fear, living in healthy relationships with others, living at peace with God. Do we have something here? Is it worth dying for? It is worth taking back out on the road again? Is it good news for the 21<sup>st</sup> century as much as it was good news in the 1<sup>st</sup> century? Are we part of the story? Can we make a difference?

God bless us each one as we leave our sanctuaries of comfort to go onto the highways of hardship where people groan in slavery and suffer in fear.  
Amen.