

Sermon On Acts 3:1-4:4

June 12, 2022

While the man held on to Peter and John, all the people were astonished and came running to them in the place called Solomon's Colonnade. **12** When Peter saw this, he said to them: "Fellow Israelites, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? **13** The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. **14** You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. **15** You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this. **16** By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see.

The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. **2** They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people, proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. **3** They seized Peter and John and, because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. **4** But many who heard the message believed; so the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand.

It's difficult to grasp the scope, or the magnitude of influence that Christ has had in our world throughout history. Aside from the cosmic and eternal ramifications of Jesus' death and resurrection, the influence of Christ can be seen literally on every street corner. On my way here this morning, I drove by maybe 15-20 churches.

American cities, streets, and landmarks have regularly been named with Christianity or Christian lore in mind. You've probably heard of Bethany, or Zion, or Goshen, or Emmaus not to mention all the Saint This-and-Thats. There's even a Hell, Michigan. They have a website which appears to been created in 1998 and never updated where it states: "More people tell you to go to our town than anywhere else on Earth."

Biblical names are so commonplace that we don't even bat an eye when we hear of someone having a name like David, Joshua, Lydia, Samuel, Elijah, Elizabeth, or Abigail.

Christ followers have been everything from slaves and prisoners, to simple farmers and factory workers, to middle-class families, to business owners, to CEO's, to politicians, kings and queens, and even emperors. Christians are athletes, artists, scientists, doctors, lawyers, teachers, and even pastors!

Christians founded schools, hospitals, orphanages, human rights organizations, and holidays. Our history is rich with the movement of God's people and the influence of Christ in just about everything and anywhere people are concerned.

In 2010 Pew Research did a study on the size and distribution of Christianity and found that there are 2.18 billion Christians of all ages around the world, representing nearly a third of the estimated global population. Christians are also geographically widespread – so far-flung, in fact, that no single continent or region can indisputably claim to be the center of global Christianity.

The influence of Christianity is so vast, its adherents so numerous, that one can hardly imagine that at one point in the early first century, the number of Christians was barely enough to fill every the seat in a Golden Corral on all-you-can-eat ribs night.

According to *The First Thousand Years: A Global History of Christianity* by Robert Louis Wilken, “at the end of the first century there were fewer than ten thousand Christians in the Roman Empire. The population at the time numbered some sixty million, which meant that Christians made up one hundredth of one percent.”

So when we go back to look at the book of Acts, understand that we are reading about the very humble beginnings of Christianity. Last week, Lisa preached about the day of Pentecost when there were about 120 Christians and about 3000 more became believers - back then, they didn't even call themselves Christians - that wouldn't come until later.

Yet, when we read these stories, we get the impression that whatever Jesus started with this rag-tag group of disciples and their families had the inexplicable power of the Holy Spirit behind it turning ordinary Jews and Gentiles into followers of “The Way.”

And of course, we are a part of this ongoing movement. Do you ever think of it that way? First Church doesn't exist for itself, but for the thing that started in another world, in another time, when God put on flesh and started teaching that the Father was trying to restore all creation back to himself and that until then, we should love one another and teach others to do the same.

If you were to give our church, First Church, a rating based on how well you thought we were living up to the mission of the early church to share the life and love of Jesus, what would you give it? What score would you give us?

To answer that question, it helps to read these stories of what the church was up to from the very beginning. We can see if we're still doing the same things. Last week was Pentecost which was the start - where it all began. Once things were started, the church continued to gain momentum - what were they up to?

This morning we're going to look at 3 things that represent the momentum of the early church.

A quick note - the book of Acts isn't an instructional guide for how to build a church. It's simply the story, or a collection of stories, of what the early church was doing right after Jesus commissioned them to continue his ministry. As we look at these stories we're not looking for specific details about how to operate church, we're looking at what these people were doing in the wake of receiving the Holy Spirit. They were just trying to spread the message of Jesus and make more disciples.

1. The earliest Christians were driven by compassion.

Peter says to the man, just before healing him: "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you."

What if we adopted that line of thinking: I may not have what you're asking for, but what I do have, I give it away.

The earliest Christians, following the example of Jesus, held deep compassion for the people they were ministering to: what I have, I give you.

I was reading a story about someone who left a \$20 tip to a waiter at a restaurant. What he really left was a religious pamphlet disguised to look like a \$20 bill. When folded up, this pamphlet looks like a \$20, but when you open it, it reads: "Don't be fooled! There is something you can have more valuable than money," On the back is an eight-paragraph argument for why the recipient should buy a bible and become a Christian. What a great introduction to Christ. Trickery!

If your takeaway from this story is that our generosity can simply be replaced by "giving the gift of Jesus," then you're missing half the message. Driven by compassion, the early church sought to teach people about Jesus *and* share their resources. The following chapters of Acts go on to

describe the efforts of the apostles to meet both the material and spiritual needs of the people.

My grandfather was like that. He drove a 1962 Studebaker Lark and it was like the ministry mobile. He kept an old milkcrate below the dash filled with small devotionals and various religious literature. He'd drive around town to shut-ins and folks from the church who he hadn't seen in a while or had hoped to see at his church. He'd stop by, pray with people, listen to them tell their stories, and leave behind something from his milkcrate. If they needed money, he'd slip them a \$10 or \$20. If they needed some work done, he'd roll up his sleeves. If they needed a ride, well...hop on in. He was old-school, but he loved people and he wanted to meet their needs in whatever way he could. (yesterday, texting my dad)

Our faith and compassion should lead us to healing the world in Jesus' name in whatever way we can. What if our attitude was: "what I do have, I give you"?

There may be a question creeping into your mind right now. Something like: why don't we have these miracles happening today? What happened to that incredible power to heal and cast out sickness?

It's a great question and I'm not sure I have a satisfying answer. It seems to me that the power of the Holy Spirit was particularly potent during the time of Jesus' ministry and the start of the church. It is very rare to hear stories of this kind of healing in more recent history and nearly all such stories are met with fair skepticism as bad-faith actors have exploited the faith of the religious for personal gain.

I believe that the "signs and wonders" of that time were in place precisely because that's when they were needed. I believe that God was doing a specific thing in a specific time and used specific means to accomplish his will.

When Michele and I were dating and in particular around the time we got married, there was a lot more energy invested in making sure that our marriage got going in the right way. Premarital counseling, taking care of wedding details, planning our living arrangements, consolidating finances, and rearranging our personal ways of doing things so that the two of us could transition to being one - a team, a partnership. Doing this required a massive effort on our part and on the part of friends and family. It required attention to detail and resources set aside specifically for that purpose. It was an exhilarating few months, full of romance and dreaming dreams and super late nights and bursts of anticipation and joy and sometimes anxiety. It was wonderful, but it's not sustainable. As people tend to say when reality - or maybe just the natural rhythms of life return - "the honeymoon is over."

To maintain and thrive in our marriage doesn't require the same energy and focus as it did to start it. That's just the reality of things. We make adjustments, we offer forgiveness, and we make special moments as we learn to live in our new reality.

So it's only a theory of mine that this is the kind of scenario we're looking at in the book of Acts. The start of the church is surrounded by signs and wonders and a fervor for the Gospel that you don't see today, maybe because it was simply unique to that time. (again, just a theory)

I believe to focus on the miracle would be to focus on the wrong thing. The thing we can replicate is the willingness to give of ourselves for the restoration of our community and the people who live in it.

If you hang around this church long enough, you will see people give themselves away. Whether it's building homes with Habitat, or passing out food at the Friday Food Truck, or giving up their Saturdays so families with special needs can get a break.

One ministry that I'd like to give a shoutout to is our Stephen Ministry. These are men and women in our church who are trained to care for other members and their family by simply listening. When you or a family

member might be going through a tough time, a Stephen Minister is available to listen and comfort. They don't give advice, they aren't professional counselors or anything like that. It's not their motto, but they certainly embody the spirit of: what I do have, I give you.

2. The second thing that seems to be driving the momentum of the early church is that the core of their ministry was faith in Jesus.

Picture this scene. A miracle is performed and there's all this commotion and people are running onto the scene and crowding around. They recognize this one-lame beggar walking, no, jumping (!) and praising God. And now, as you'd expect, they're gawking at Peter and John. They are now witnesses to a miracle.

Humans have a tendency of elevating anyone to celebrity status when a man or woman displays a particular power or aptitude. This is true of musicians, athletes, politicians, business owners, or just the insanely rich and talented.

But notice how Peter responds to the crowd in this scenario:

Peter says in verses 13 and 16, "Fellow Israelites, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? "By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see."

The next day, when Peter and John are on trial for this "public disturbance" the high priest and rulers and elders and teachers are examining them and it says in 4:13 - "When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus."

The point here is that the early church didn't lose sight of the source of their compassion and power - Jesus Christ. They stayed faithful to the Jesus mission and you'll notice that it goes one of two ways...

1. When the work of the Kingdom is met with growth and celebration and changed lives, it's all credited back to Jesus and faithfulness to his mission.
2. When the work of the Kingdom is met with fear, persecution, and threat of violence, they still remain faithful to the mission of Jesus. They lean into the promise of Jesus' salvation.

Just one chapter over in Acts, 5 we can read about the Apostles being arrested (again) for teaching about Jesus. When they get out of jail they are ordered not to do that any more and then they are flogged. The scripture says they left "rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name [of Jesus]."

When it was good, they celebrated God's goodness, and when it was bad they clung to the promise of salvation. They kept Christ at the center of their ministry no matter how it was going.

We must also live with these two realities - when we are blessed we give glory to God and when it seems like we're cursed, instead of blaming God, we put our hope in his faithfulness.

3. The third thing I observe the early church doing, is a willingness to be counter-culture.

This will always be true of anyone proclaiming the Gospel of Christ.

Not every culture across the history of the world will be hostile toward Christianity. Take for example this great experiment we're all living in right now...America. You have the freedom to attend church, talk openly about Christ, and if you want to slap a Jesus Saves bumper sticker on your car or shout from the street corner that God's love is for all, you can!

But even in this time of religious generosity, the message of Jesus is counter-cultural. Sin will always have a controlling hand in the forces that govern our world, our philosophies, and our socio-economic systems.

In chapter 4, verse 1-2, it says, The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people, proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead.

At the time, the central tenet of our faith, the resurrection of Christ was a new and controversial idea. The religious leaders of the day, some of whom didn't even believe in the concept of resurrection, would have preferred that Jesus be remembered as a blaspheming false prophet and then forgotten. Executing Jesus as a shamed criminal seemed to be a good way to stamp out his legacy...except that he didn't stay in the tomb!

The early church leaned heavily into the teachings of Jesus and the story of his resurrection and this counter-cultural message accompanied by powerful miracles sustained that early momentum in adding people as believers.

Let me suggest that when we do the same - follow the teachings of Jesus and continue to tell the story of his resurrection that we are doing ministry in the same spirit as the early church.

If you were to give our church, First Church, a rating based on how well you thought we were living up to the mission of the early church to share the life and love of Jesus, what would you give it? What score would you give us?

I happen to be a huge fan of our mission statement. I like it because it shows what's important for our church. I also like it because it represents what a robust faith journey should look like.

When I line up our mission statement with what I believe is behind the momentum of the early church, I see some compelling similarities.

A people driven by compassion for one another and serving in the name and power of Jesus in a way that is contrary to the dominant culture of the time sounds a lot to me like “devoted to Christ, connected to others, and sent to serve.”

If you believe in the mission and ministry of First Church, then I encourage you to commit to supporting us by your presence, by offering your time in service, and in sharing your resources. If you’re watching online, maybe you live in another part of the country, I wonder if you can live out the mission of the early church, or the mission of First Church in your own neighborhood - among your own family and friends. Either way, we’ll all have the opportunity to make a commitment next week as Pastor Lisa leads us in making our yearly promises to the church.

I’m looking at the early church and thinking, church today looks way different than it did back then, yet somehow it’s the same. It’s the same as long as the things that provided momentum for them are still providing us momentum for us today.

Let’s pray and hope together that we keep the mission of Jesus center to our calling, that our first response is always compassion for all of God’s people, and that we’ll boldly proclaim the gospel even when it’s unpopular or dangerous.