

Sunday October 3, 2021
 Lesson 5: The Church's Activities
 Scripture: Acts 2: 37-47

Context:

The 2021 fall series is titled "Belong." Each unit will focus on a way the people of God are called to seek community and discover how God has connected us to one another. The first unit focused upon hospitality and how Christians are invited to encourage others to belong. Today starts a new unit titled "Into the Future," and is an exploration of the early church's foundations and a call to return to our roots for renewal. The first lesson in this unit, "The Church's Activities," invites us to discover how the early church was shaped by the Holy Spirit and how the Holy Spirit shapes the church today.

The lesson's scripture comes from Acts, also known as the history book of the church. The scriptures today come following the initial sermon following the Pentecost event by which the Holy Spirit filled the disciples and people were attracted to this strange, yet powerful event. Following the event, Peter begins to preach a sermon recounting the story of Jesus and inviting the people to respond.

What follows is the conversion experience, particularly for those who were Jews from their area as well as others visiting Jerusalem for the religious festival of the time. Unique to other accounts of conversion in the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, here Peter offers those repentance and baptism in the name of Jesus Christ. This is not to say this a step-by-step pattern for a person's salvation: a person is "cut to the heart," repents, receives forgiveness, and then receives the gift of the Holy Spirit.¹ Instead, this gives us a glimpse into a specific event for the Pentecost day as the Spirit gifts repentance and forgiveness to Israel alongside the gift of reconciliation for those who participated in the death of Jesus.² This also helps to account for the growth in the Christian community and the rapid nature by which the movement spread.

The next account of the conversion moves with Peter continuing to teach and encourage them. What follows is the beginning pattern of the early church to shape what we know today. There are four major acts which characterize the early church and how they go through life together: they "devote themselves to the apostles' teaching," they gather together in fellowship, they "break the bread," and they devote themselves to being a people of prayer.³ The summary of the activity of the church focuses our attention away from individual actors to the main concern of the narrative – the community.⁴ And

¹ Willimon, William H. "Acts," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2010), 37.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid. 40,41.

⁴ Ibid. 42.

the Holy Spirit works to move to the community to new heights and new places.

Application

When I was in seminary at Vanderbilt University, I once remembered someone asking a retired Bishop what he would do if he had to do it all over again. His response did not include building larger churches or adding more programs. Instead his answer seemed very simple: he said he would shape his churches with more opportunities to receive Holy Communion, more offerings of opportunities to learn the spiritual disciplines, and to encourage acts of mercy and kindness. Some of us were mystified initially. Shouldn't he talk about more buildings to house more people, or bigger programs to attract certain types of people? The answer seemed so simplistic and there was no flashiness, nothing to attract people.

Yet the more one thought about it and reflected upon what the retired Bishop offered, the more things registered and clicked. Spending more time in ministry, I have found the Bishop's counsel to be true. The people of God do not need more flashy programs or expensive buildings necessarily. People are looking for a connection to God and to one another. People are hungry for the Holy Spirit to guide and lead us so we may be who God has made and called us to be.

In some ways, the good Bishop was offering us a back to the basics lesson. In the book of Acts, we hear how the community of faith was formed by the Holy Spirit and how those practices are still at work today. God has given us what we need to follow Jesus and the Holy Spirit will continue to build us up and lead us in the direction we need to go.

The first thing we see the Holy Spirit do in this passage is to help people see where they have erred and how corruption is always a temptation, even in religious institutions and traditions. It happens in all sorts of ways from people who hold their tithes to get attention and to clergy who plot and plan appointments to either increase their salary or maintain the perception of prestige. These are acts by which the institution and participants in the institution do not heed the counsel of the Holy Spirit. We get lost in things and miss out on how God has called us to order life together.

God has given us the template for how we are called to do ministry. We are called to be the church not for our own sake or to focus on simply maintaining institutions. We are called to be the body of Christ and to find those means by which God calls us to do life together.

The first is to listen to the Word being proclaimed and to see how it plays out in our daily lives. The second is to fellowship, to find ways to be together and to also discuss how to use our resources for the common good. The third is to receive Holy Communion whenever we can and to see it is a gift from God. And the final is to be a people of prayer and to find those ways we can pray for each other and for God to direct our path.

At the core of the church is the community of believers. When we are at our best, we can love and support each other to see the beauty of God in front of us. This takes trust and transparency, and it also takes intentional effort. As Jesus calls us, we are invited to a new life in the Spirit. This life is where we are called to consider how we walk with God and how we walk with one another.

How have you seen the Holy Spirit form you? What is the danger of seeing the

church just as an institution to be maintained? When there is corruption in the church at any level, how does that cause issues in the body of Christ at every level? How have the four acts mentioned early in the text helped you grow in your walk with Christ? Where do we look like the early church, and where does it seem we need to grow spiritually?

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