

biblestudy: august 2017

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Based on the scripture lessons of Cokesbury’s Adult Bible Study Series

August 6, 2017 Text: Acts 6:1-8 “Called to Witness”

This series of lessons on “God’s Urgent Call” moves us from a couple of months in the Old Testament to four weeks in the Book of Acts. This week’s lesson introduces Stephen and we begin to anticipate his death by stoning as Saul (soon to be Paul) stood by (Acts 7). Some say that these verses in Acts show the beginning of the office of Deacon.

J. C. Penney often took potential employees out for a meal and interview. Penney watched carefully. If the would-be worker salted the food before tasting it, Penney decided on the spot not to hire that person. His theory was that one needed to do away with pre-conceived notions and act on the basis of the realities of a situation.

Mr. Penney might have been willing to hire some of the believers in the early church in Jerusalem! They came face-to-face with a new situation and instead of providing the same old answer (just add salt), they created a new response that was more appropriate for this circumstance. Someone needed to provide care for the widows who were left without support (Acts 6:1). How was it to be done?

The first thought was to do what they always did (add salt), but the disciples gathered and decided that was not the best way to use the personnel and resources of the Church (Acts 6:2). Let’s do something different! After carefully examining the needs of the community and considering the urgency of proclamation (Acts 6:2-3)—in other words, tasting

the food before deciding if salt was needed—the early Church established the new ministry of those who would tend to the feeding of the widows. Which role was the one of persons “called to witness”? Both! One group witnessed by its words of testimony (Acts 6:4) and others witnessed by their lives of service (Acts 6:3). And in that way, “the number of disciples increased” (Acts 6:7).

How do we divide the work? Elders. Deacons. Local Pastors. Church officers. Prayer warriors. Small group leaders. Stephen ministers. Shut-in visitors. Lay servant ministers. Financial stewards. Bulletin-folders. Soup fixers. Teachers. Question-askers. Even pew sitters. God calls the faithful to witness and one size does not fit all. The early Church learned that and there was “grace and power” (Acts 6:8).

What Someone Else Has Said:

Adam Hamilton (*Creed*, Abingdon Press) wrote: “As human beings we need community. We need to belong. We need others to encourage us, challenge us, care for us, and be cared for by us. We are wired this way.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Gracious Lord, as we live together in the Church, open us to new possibilities of our life together...”

August 13, 2017 Text: Acts 8:26-39 “Called to Break Down Barriers”

They were different in so many ways. Philip did his ministry in Samaria (Acts 8:4). The treasurer was from the farthest reach of the known world, Ethiopia (Acts 8:27). Philip was no doubt a brown-skinned Judean; the treasurer was a dark-skinned African. Philip was someone who was primarily a helper (Acts 6:5); the treasurer was a man of position and power (Acts 8:27). Philip’s sexuality was not denied; the treasurer was sexually different (Acts 8:27). Philip was a believer in the Lord Jesus (Acts 8:12); the treasurer was a religious man, but not a follower of Jesus (Acts 8:27). They were different in so many ways.

What could possibly bring them together? It was a nudge from the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:29). Theologians call that “prevenient grace,” the seeking, initiating movement of God in our lives before we realize what it all means. What could possibly bring them together? One thing they had in common: a willingness to explore the Scriptures to hear what God is saying.

In the midst of divisions that tear into the fabric of the Church, we do well to remember that God’s prevenient grace may work in some unexpected places. In the midst of discussions of what separates us, we do well to trust that those with whom we disagree are also willing to explore new insights in God’s Holy Word.

So, the working grace of God and a common openness to Scripture give

Philip and the treasurer a meeting ground. They look together at Isaiah 53:7-8. Interestingly, the treasurer asks a question (“About whom does the prophet say this?”) and the text itself ends with a question (“Who can tell the story of his descendants...?”) Encounters with God and searches for God’s will are fruitful when they begin not with pre-determined answers but begin with heart-opening questions.

Philip moves to the truth that will bind together these two who have so much to separate them: he points to Jesus (Acts 8:35). In the loving power of Jesus Christ, differences of opinions and differences of experiences fall to second place. The waters of baptism glue the two together (Acts 8:38). May it be so for us.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Allison Stokes (*Shalom, Salaam, Peace*, Global Ministries) quotes Bishop Dale White: “The church of Jesus Christ, in the power and unity of the Holy Spirit, is called to serve as an alternative community to an alienated and fractured world.”

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Loving, seeking, caring God, break into our broken places with such grace that healing and unity become signs of Your presence and our lives become witnesses to that peace...”

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August 20, 2017 Text: Acts 9:10-20 “Called to Preach”

The study text for this week is surrounded by dramatic and memorable accounts. It is preceded by the well-known encounter of Saul with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-6). It is followed by the plot of some of the Jews to kill the “traitor” Saul (Acts 9:23-25). Thus was the new apostle Paul called to preach.

The first time I preached was at my home church in Siler City, July 12, 1953. The most recent time I preached was when a sick colleague called at 8:00 on Sunday morning and asked me to fill in for him. In between, if my records are semi-correct, I have preached 2,392 times. My sermons have been delivered in 269 different congregations in our North Carolina Annual Conference. I’ve preached in Baptist, Presbyterian, Disciples of Christ, Episcopal, and A.M.E. churches. *Et cetera. Et cetera.*

But I have not had a vision that spoke loud words to me. I have not had to escape the killing wrath of angry mobs. Is there something amiss? Have I misunderstood God’s call? Does God’s claim upon a life always come packaged with the kind of drama and theater that is described in this text in Acts? The simple answer is “No,” but there are at least two things that my call to preach and Paul’s experience have in common. (1) God reached Paul and God reached me in ways that were consistent with our personalities and life journey. (2) Paul’s understanding of his call and my understanding of my call were both tested with the Church:

August 27, 2017 Text: Acts 10:19-33 “Called to Be Inclusive”

The Common English Bible translation of Acts 10:19 makes a strong statement about the movement of the Holy Spirit: “While Peter was brooding over the vision, the Spirit interrupted him...” Eugene Peterson (*The Message*) paraphrases it: “Peter, lost in thought, didn’t hear them, so the Spirit whispered to him...” *The Good News Bible* puts it this way: “Peter was still trying to understand what the vision meant, when the Spirit said, ‘Listen!’...”

What these translations and paraphrases indicate is that the Holy Spirit does not always have easy access to us! To be sure, the searching grace of God is with us in ways we do not understand or recognize, but there are places in our journey where we seem to necessitate the Spirit’s “kicking it up a notch.”

In this study text, the Spirit has had to work at two ends to make a meeting place. Cornelius gets the message to get with Simon Peter (Acts 10:5). Peter also got a word from the Spirit to connect with Cornelius (Acts 10:22). In both cases, hardly anyone would have blamed either of the men for saying, “No.” We do not like to be invited into uncomfortable relationships. It is not easy to hear that God wants us to be in community with someone “not like me.”

Peter was open to Cornelius’ invitation (Acts 10:23-24). Cornelius was open to having Peter as a guest and was open to hearing what

for clarity, encouragement, and accountability.

Can you imagine what went through the mind of Ananias as he went to the house where Saul was staying (Acts 9:11, 13, 17)? Can you imagine what was going through Saul’s mind as he went three days without sight, three days without food, three days without drink (Acts 9:9)? The remarkable thing is the faithfulness with which they both responded, even without knowing what would happen next. I must confess that I am more given to careful planning and logistics.

Maybe as much as anything, this text teaches us that no one is beyond the purview of God’s claim and call. One’s call is not to be measured by how much it is like someone else’s call; it is to be measured only by what God wants *me* to do.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In Chaim Potok’s novel *My Name is Asher Lev*, the rabbi says to Asher: “But one does not always give in to a gift. One does with a life what is precious not only to one’s own self, but to one’s own people.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Lord, I’m listening...”

message Peter might have (Acts 10:25, 33). What remarkable things God can do when we see that God shows “no partiality to one group of people over another” (Acts 10:34)!

Where is God issuing that call today? To whom has God turned to convey and live out that truth? There is a clue in Peter’s statement to Cornelius: “(Jesus) is Lord of all” (Acts 10:36). Rather than being a statement of exclusion about whom God loves, it is a statement of inclusion that sees beyond the human-created boundaries. And the Church is today the body of Christ (Colossians 1:18). The Church is called to be God’s instrument of inclusion.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Duke professor Norman Wirzba has written (*Way of Love*, Harper One): “In this book I return to Jesus’s original vision of the church as a training camp for love. Seeing Christianity as a school or laboratory that trains people in the ways of love is the best way to understand the work and mission of the church. When the church is faithful to its calling, it offers the most extensive curriculum imaginable, because the curriculum touches every aspect of life and this world.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Come, Holy Spirit, move into my hard-of-hearing places and touch me with truth...”

Disaster Response Call Center Volunteers Still Needed

Thousands of lives were impacted as Hurricane Matthew stormed through North Carolina on October 8, 2016. There are still many people with repair and rebuilding needs. We can’t all volunteer to clean and rebuild houses, but we can play a part in rebuilding by volunteering at the Disaster Response Call Center at the Methodist Building in Garner, NC. If you can answer phones, we can use your help. You can sign up for a few hours a week or a few hours each day Monday through Friday, 8:30 a.m. – 5 p.m. Call Center members will teach you everything you need to know and help you along the way as you assist callers requesting help. We can also use volunteers that have basic computer skills and who are willing to be trained to enter data. To volunteer, call 1.888.440.9167 or email disasterresponse@nccumc.org

Bruised And Broken “A bruised reed He will not break” -Isaiah 42:3.

A young boy walking along a country road pulled up some reeds in a ditch to make a whistle. He picked out a straight one, clipped the ends, made a notch and several holes in the stalk, and blew into it. But no music! He clipped and whittled some more, but still no music. Finally in frustration, he snapped the reed in two and threw it back into the ditch.

There are many bruised reeds in the body of Christ people — who have been hurt in life’s fray. The Lord wants to bring music into their lives, and to do this He must fashion and shape them. However, he will never do what that boy did with his reed. He does not give up on His own and cast them aside. He keeps working with them. He knows just how much they can take — how much cutting and fashioning they require. He is patient and gentle. That’s what Isaiah was portraying to Israel when he said, “A bruised reed He will not break.”

Thinking of how compassionate the Lord has been in dealing with me, I'm ashamed of my impatience with others, especially when words of kindness and a loving hand might have awakened a melody in a broken heart.

Many people are like bruised reeds. May we, with Christ-like love, treat them with gentleness.