

biblestudy: october 2021

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

October 3, 2021 Text: Acts 2:37-47 "The Church's Activities"

Although I am disappointed that this description of early church life does not include dartball, I am inspired by how they stayed focused. (If "dartball" does not ring any bells for you, google "Fellowship Dartball League." If the description of the early church does not ring any bells for you, look at Acts 2:42.)

Notice the way those early believers looked both inwardly and outwardly. They met together and they shared meals (Acts 2:46). They also demonstrated God's goodness to everyone (Acts 2:47). Sadly, some of our contemporary weakness as the Church comes when we choose to focus only inwardly ("Let's take care of us") or only outwardly ("Forget my spiritual disciplines; what does the world out there need?") There is a church near me that has a sign in its yard: "Enter to worship...Depart to serve." These verses about the early church seem to express that same pattern.

Sometimes in our eagerness to reach out to the community around us, we neglect means of grace named by John Wesley: the public worship of God, the Word read and expounded, the Lord's Supper, prayer, Scripture study, fasting, conferencing. Sometimes in our eagerness to make our own spiritual journey strong, we neglect the other means of grace that Mr. Wesley named: work among the poor. The early church worked to balance the two: inward and outward.

October 10, 2021 Text: Corinthians 12:12-31 "The Church as One Body"

This is a fill-in-the-blank paragraph. Think about your local church and jot down the name that best completes the sentence. _____ really knows how to cook for church suppers. _____ has a great knowledge of the Bible. _____ can sing any song in the book. _____ is a prayer warrior. _____ is really involved in community-wide helping ministries. _____ is super-well organized. _____ keeps up to date on all the sick and shut-ins.

Well, you get the idea. The gifts for ministry are divided up within the body of Christ. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:12, "...many parts, and all the parts of the body are one body." To fail to use the gift God has given me is to insist that the body of Christ, the Church, try to get by without two arms or to try to do ministry with eyes closed or ears stopped up. There is no Christian virtue in making believe that we are just being humble when in truth we are just being spiritually lazy. (Oops. Why are my toes hurting right now? Did someone just step on them?)

Of course, when we peek around the corner we see what Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians 12:31: "And I'm going to show you an even better way." That way, as we know from the famous 1 Corinthians 13 chapter, is love. All of the other gifts, when at their best, are simply varied expressions of love. Even the gift of judgment and discipline can be a gift of love.

October 17, 2021 Text: Matthew 16:13-19 "The Church as a Discerning Body"

When I ask a friend for an opinion on some subject, it can really bug me when that friend says, "It depends." I want a "yes" or "no," and what I get is "It depends." But Jesus says almost that same thing to Peter: Sometimes things need to be loosened and sometimes things need to be fastened" (Matthew 16:19). I guess "it depends."

The Bible is filled with accounts of faithful people asking questions or pondering situations in order to determine the will of God. Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:3) said to himself, "Let me check out this amazing sight and find out why the bush isn't burning up." Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:5-7) challenged God about whether God had really called him to be a prophet. The mother of our Lord, Mary (Luke 1:29, 34) was confused and kept asking questions about her pending pregnancy. In Acts 2:5-8, pious Jews ask question after question, to get clarification of what is happening at Pentecost.

When God leads God's people into a new direction, the people often struggle to make sure it is clear what God is saying and doing. How are such decisions to be made? Jesus tells Peter that He is giving the disciple "the keys of the kingdom" (Matthew 16:19). In other words,

Luke, the author of Acts, makes it clear that even though the Church has multiple activities and invitations, it is God who saves. Acts 2:46 says "God brought about three thousand..." Acts 2:47 says, "The Lord added daily..." Peter told the crowd that baptism was about the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). (That is why persons are to be baptized only once; baptism is not about human decision, but is about the activity of God and God does not mess up.) Life in the Church is a record of the movement of God.

These looks at the early church are the observations and reports of insiders. Acts is addressed to Theophilus. "Theophilus" means "lover of God." What does the Church look like to those who are not on the inside? What does the Church look like to the world at large? If a non-believer wrote the story, how would it be different? Hmmmm. I wonder.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Pope Francis (*The Joy of the Gospel*, Image) wrote: "It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but 'by attraction,'"

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Lord of the Church, tear down those things that block the paths the world might take to You..."

Often when persons are being interviewed about the possibility for becoming clergy, they are asked to tell their "call story." Many times, that story begins with an account of someone who said to the potential pastor, "You have real gifts for caring" or "You have excellent gifts for speaking" or simply "You would make a great pastor." We ought to listen to one another when someone says to us, "You have a gift of doing _____." That blank would get filled in differently for each of us, but others may see in us a tool for ministry (a leg for the body of Christ) that we have not seen in ourselves. Likewise, there is value in affirming to others the gifts we see in them.

These gifts do not stand alone. They go together to form the active body of Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit. (1 Corinthians 12:18)

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Japanese Contributions to Christian Theology* (Westminster Press), Carl Michalson wrote: "'No (person) can understand (self) apart from an encounter with another. The church provides for that encounter. Not simply because it is a fellowship of Christians, but because it is the place where Jesus Christ, the true (human), is met.'"

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Use me, O Lord, in Your body..."

In other words, our decisions—the way the Church thinks—are to be decided by kingdom values.

"What we've always done" and "what we've always taught" do not necessarily reflect the unfolding will of God. God waited to send the Messiah. Does that mean that God did not want people to accept the Savior? Of course not! Is there some new insight or clarification or deepening of thought that God is sending the 21st century Church?

The challenge is not to find out what people want; the task is to find out what God wants. In Matthew 16:17, Jesus celebrates with Simon that God is still at work revealing the ways of God's love. And that is still true.

Jesus' instruction remains: What needs to be loosened and what needs to be fastened (Matthew 16:19)?

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What Someone Else Has Said:

In *An On-going Conversation* (Westminster John Knox Press), Walter Brueggemann and Clover Reuter Beal say: “The church doesn’t need to be the happiest place in town. The church needs to be the most honest place in town. Out of such honesty, happiness arises. There is

nothing more emancipatory than being able to tell the truth in a safe place.”



Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Touch Your Church again, Lord...”

October 24, 2021 Text: Revelation 3:1-6, 14-20 “The Need for Spiritual Renewal”

When I read the descriptions of the church at Sardis and the church at Laodicea (Revelation 3:1-6, 14-20), two modern images came to mind. Sardis reminded me of a big First Church downtown, the one where every pastor in the conference wants to be appointed. It has a great reputation, but, in fact, is spiritually dead (Revelation 3:1). Laodicea reminded me of a prosperous, rapidly growing mega-church that tones down the gospel’s demands in order to stay prosperous and growing (Revelation 3:16).

Of course, these same shortfalls can be found in congregations of any size or locale. It is almost as if the Book of Revelation is written to the Church of the 21st century. Maybe there is a reason that both of these accounts close with a call to listen to what the Spirit is saying “to the churches.” It’s not just about *them*; it is also about *us*.

What has happened in these churches? John (who wrote the Book of Revelation) says they are not living lives of holiness. He uses the image of clean clothes that have been soiled to depict lives that have lost their purity (Revelation 3:4, 18). John is saying in so many words: You can talk the talk, but you do not walk the walk.

John tells the church in Sardis (and in my neighborhood) that those who follow the Lord will walk with Him (Revelation 3:4). What would it mean to walk with Jesus?

It would mean welcoming people that others resist. It would mean feeding the hungry. It would mean caring about wounded and hurt people. It would mean speaking truth to power. It would mean being willing to suffer in order to stay faithful. It would mean staying in close touch with God. It would mean studying and testifying to the Word.

John tells the church in Laodicea (and in my neighborhood) that those who answer the Lord’s invitation will be fed with Him (Revelation 3:20). They will triumph even beyond death by sharing Christ’s victory with Him. (Revelation 3:21).

These texts become good lens with which to look at our church experience today. Although there is a dreariness in both of these churches (Sardis and Laodicea), there is also a blessed word of hope and promise. Thanks be to God for loving us enough to correct us.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Diane Butler Bass (*Broken We Kneel* , Church Publishing, Incorporated) has written: “Church is not a place you go; church is not a club you join; church is something you are.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Let us walk together, Lord...”

October 31, 2021 Text: Deuteronomy 29:10-29 “Covenant Renewal”

Do you know how many whiskers the average cat has on its muzzle? (Twelve on each side.)

What does the word “chiliad” mean? (A group of 1,000.)

How old was William Shakespeare when he died? (52 years old) For that matter, how tall was he? (6 feet, 4 inches.)

Can you tell that I am stalling? This week’s focus text spells out what happens if God’s people break their covenant (Deuteronomy 29:22-28). (It ain’t pretty.) Moses is trying to call the people to renew the bonds they had with God, for example, when He led them out of Egypt’s captivity (Deuteronomy 29:16). Moses knows that some people will make believe their relationship with God is in good shape, even though they have adopted other gods (Deuteronomy 29:18-19).

I guess I am stalling because Moses’ challenge is just as appropriate in this year as it was when he first spoke it. God doesn’t mess around with folks who ignore the covenant, the agreement, with God. Renewing the covenant is as critical today as it was then and I don’t have to look beyond my zip code to find evidence of our violating the divine covenant. (In fact, there are days I don’t have to look beyond a house numbered 8809.)

I have been to services of baptismal renewal. I have been to services of marriage renewal. I have been to service of conversion renewal. What these services have in common is an admission that these covenants have not been lived out perfectly, but “we agree to start again.”

This difficult passage in Deuteronomy is a clear reminder that we are not to take for granted the grace God extends to us. Maybe I stall because I do not want to face that reality, but that very grace is offered by God who invites us to come out of our brokenness to renew the covenant that offers us the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 29:16).

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *The Second Mountain* (Random House), David Brooks quotes Jonathan Sacks: “A contract is a transaction. A covenant is a relationship....A contract is about interests; a covenant is about identity. It is about you and me coming together to form an ‘us.’ That’s why contracts benefit, but covenants transform.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Holy God, You have moved me from the captive places of my life; help me stay away from them that I might live in Promised Land...””

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