

biblestudy: July 2022

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

July 3, 2022 Text: Acts 2:37-47 "A New Community of Believers"

Reading this focal text raised an embarrassing question for me. Why has no one looked at the life I lead or heard the word I proclaimed and then asked the question that begins this account: "What should we do?"

Is my life witness so indistinguishable from the world around me that no one looks on and wonders, "How could I have a life like that, so filled with love, so confident with hope, so caring for others, so in touch with God?" Why do I not hear that question from those who observe me?

There was something about the way Peter and the apostles "stood out from the crowd" that made non-believers want to join the parade. Peter and the other believers made it clear to those around them that Jesus Christ was the one who had come to save the world (Acts 2:36). How does my proclamation today invite others to accept this truth about Jesus Christ?

One thing that Peter makes clear to those who heard him was that life would have to change: "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation" (Acts 2:40). In other words, life lived with Jesus Christ does not look the same as life lived in ignoring the Lord.

So, these verses not only speak to those outside the faith community, but they also speak to those of us who have "repented and been

baptized" (Acts 2:38).

There is an important reassurance at the close of this study text. We are not in this alone. Note what happens as persons reap the harvest of the Spirit's gifts: life together (teaching, fellowship, eating and praying together) (Acts 2:42). We are not in this alone! To be invited into a Christian faith experience is to be invited into community.

John Wesley wrote, "The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social." That attitude lives out what this account in Acts spells out. Baptism is not a private event; it is part of a shared journey. Praise God!

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Beyond Loneliness* (Upper Room Books), Trevor Hudson writes: "We do not make the journey to God alone. There is no solitary Christ-follower. When we open our lives to Jesus, he comes with his arms around his brothers and sisters. As I've said before, our friendship with Jesus is personal, but not private. To be connected with Jesus is to be connected to his friends as well."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Lord Jesus, use me for others..."

July 10, 2022 Text: Acts 8:26-39 "Philip, the Ethiopian, and Scripture's Guidance"

The Holy Spirit must have been alive and well as this account in Acts 8:26-39 unfolds. There is reason after reason that most of us would have turned away before the Spirit's work was done.

(All references are to the eighth chapter of Acts.) Would I respond if I thought an angel spoke to me? (v. 26). I'd think I was dreaming. Would I willingly go to a deserted road by myself? (v. 26). I prefer to stay where the streetlights are. How would I relate to someone of a different race? (v. 27) How comfortable would I be talking to someone who was in big-time high finance? (v. 27) Am I at ease with persons who are sexually different? (v. 27)

Do I trust the religious motive of everyone who has worshiped? (v. 27) How do I feel about someone I find reading the Bible? (v. 28). Maybe they are a fundamentalist! Now, what if I am led to go and get with this strange dude? (v. 30) It doesn't get any better. This fellow asks for help. (v. 31). What if he wants to ask a question about something I don't understand myself? This could be embarrassing! Well, you get the idea. There is talk of Jesus as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy (v. 35). And this baptism thing. How do I know that the eunuch is a good candidate for this? (v. 39)?

There are multiple places in this story where I am afraid I would have bailed out. Thanks be to God that the Spirit is stronger than our human

mutterings and sputterings.

So, I am left to ask if there are encounters like this possible in my life? Are there certain kinds of people I had rather not been seen with? Am I missing God's call to me to be available to "the least, the lost, the lonely"? When have I left my "home turf" to be a witness in some "different" place?

Not only as individuals, but as congregations we need to explore how we measure up to the example of Philip as an instrument of the Holy Spirit. One way to do that is to read the story and substitute your own name or the name of your congregation every time the text mentions Philip. Does the account continue in the same flow? Where does it tilt in another direction? Come, Holy Spirit! Help us!

What Someone Else Has Said:

Walter Brueggemann (*Truth Speaks to Power: The Countercultural Nature of Scripture* Westminster John Knox) says: "The surge of the Spirit generates social upheavals that entrenched power cannot negate and social possibility that entrenched power cannot halt."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Where do you send me, O God?..."

July 17, 2022 Text: Acts 11:1-18 "Crossing Cultural Barriers with the Spirit's Help"

In last week's study, the Holy Spirit led Philip to witness to an Ethiopian eunuch, a man different on a number of counts (Acts 8:26-39). In this week's focal text, the Holy Spirit is instructing Peter to make no distinction between "them" and "us" (Acts 11:12) Good grief! Do you suppose God intends us to cross over these things that divide us?

What about the early division between the church in the West and the Church in the East? What about deciding who was Pope? How about the disagreement about even having a pope? What about disagreement about Scriptural authority? What about splits over racial make-up? What about separation on theological points like sanctification? What about dividing over whether or not to have bishops? What about arguments about war, capital punishment, alcohol, marijuana, environment? Attitudes toward divorce? How much water for baptism?

Then, this morning I went to Sunday School. Our class was considering buying food from a particular restaurant in order to serve it to a group facility for needy families. One member said we ought to vote "No," because that chain of restaurants had an open policy and practice against gay and lesbian people. So, suddenly this week's focal text from Acts 11 did not seem so distant. Is disagreement on this matter simply a matter of preference? Is it a point of biblical understanding? Is it serious enough to separate into two distinct Sunday School classes? Where would Jesus buy food for the needy? How do we decide what is essential to the Christian faith and practice and what is simply a matter of emphasis? You may have noticed: so far, I have raised sixteen questions.

Here's another. When is it more faithful to Christ to stay together even

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when we do not agree and when is it more faithful to Christ when we do not dilute our energies by trying ineffectively to live with differences and when is it more faithful to Christ to set ourselves apart on issues of the essence of the Gospel...and what is the essence of the Gospel?

It is no secret that The United Methodist Church—and other Christian traditions—is in the midst of answering these questions. In this story in Acts, when the Spirit spoke, they heard an invitation to unity and “they were silenced” (Acts 13:18). What is the nature of the unity the Spirit would give? Oops...another question.

July 24, 2022 Text: Acts 15:1-21 “The Jerusalem Council and Adjusting to New Ways”

When God seeks to move God’s People beyond “what has always been,” it is difficult. This account of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1-21) is a good example of that. Some of the believers only knew of salvation for those who practiced circumcision (Acts 15:1). Now, some were coming along and saying that God also was saving Gentiles who did not practice these Mosaic laws. Could that be?

When the debate got hot and heavy (v. 2), Peter began to tell of Gentiles who had been saved by faith “through the grace of the Lord Jesus” (v. 11). After hearing this, James reported that he was convinced that God would save “even all the Gentiles” (v. 17).

Of course, this did not mean that anything goes in terms of holy behavior. James warned the Gentiles (as well as the Hebrews) that idolatry, cheapened sexual relations, and food that abuses life (blood) are still forbidden (Acts 15:20).

One thing that jumps out to me is the fact that these early Christians were willing to talk and explore these new ideas with one another. It was as if they asked one another: What insights has God given you? What understandings do you want to hear more about? What about believers who have had experiences different than mine? These are not questions that can be answered if I stay in my corner or “take my marbles and go home.”

July 31, 2022 Text: Acts 16 “Mission in Strange and Dangerous Places”

This sixteenth chapter of Acts is so filled with drama and twists and turns that I have to think it would make a great TV series. Any way you slice this account, it is filled with courage and faithfulness and, in the end, triumphs for the Gospel.

I asked several friends to tell me about the “strangest and most dangerous” situation in which they had tried to be a witness for Jesus Christ. (Most of us feel that kind of experience was for another day.) I got a range of answers: “I refused to drink liquor at a college party.” “I registered as a conscientious objector during the Viet Nam War.” “I went on a mission trip to Honduras.” “I went into the ministry even though my family wanted me to work in the family lumber business.” “I got involved in politics so I could work for justice issues.”

One thing I notice about Paul’s witness is that he did not go looking for trouble; trouble seemed to find him. Perhaps his greatest testimony is that he simply was ready for whatever life put on his plate: travel (v. 10), conversation (v. 13), a wealthy woman (v. 14), an abused girl (v. 16), a severe beating (v. 22), prison (v. 23), an earthquake (v. 26), a potential suicide (v. 27), a conversion (v. 31), an apology (v. 39), community (v. 40). That’s quite a mix of opportunities!

How do I know if my outreach is my own doing or if it is the leading of the Holy Spirit? For Paul, that concern was answered by asking another question: “Is this action in the spirit of Jesus Christ?” (vv. 7, 18).

What Someone Else Has Said:

Warren Smith (*Firebrand Magazine*) wrote: “To be members of a Church composed of sinners seeking to be the light of God’s holiness to the world (the only way the Church’s mission can hope to be fulfilled) is to pray for the patient and forbearing love of God.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Broken, we come to You, O God...”

A key word for United Methodists is “conference.” We think of church conference, charge conference, district conference, annual conference, jurisdictional conference, general conference. The word “conference” bursts out of “confer,” when we check in with one another, and that is what the early church was doing at the Council at Jerusalem. In the verses that follow the study text, the apostles began figuring out ways to spread the word of these new insights about how expansive God’s love and grace is.

When I am sick, I confer with a doctor. When I am lonely, I confer with a friend. When I am confused, I confer with a teacher. When I am planning, I confer with a lawyer. When I am bored, I confer with an entertainment. When I am hungry, I confer with a restaurant. And if I ponder if I have misunderstood God’s will for God’s Church, I confer with the Scripture...and discover that sometimes I have had it wrong: God does do a new thing!

What Someone Else Has Said:

Christine Harman (*For the Common Good*, Discipleship Resources) wrote: “Paul chooses to address the growing breakdown of unity among the believers. He drives home the point that all are necessary for the one body to be whole...”

Prayer:

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

The measurement of a mission’s integrity is its faithfulness to the ministry and touch of Jesus Christ.

The closing verse (v. 40) of this week’s text describes the apostles’ departure as one when they “encouraged” (NRSV), “comforted” (King James Version), “exhorted” (Henry Alford translation) the brothers and sisters who would remain. With those various renditions, I was curious about the word being translated. It turns out that it is *parakalēō*, a word formed from two words: call near. Now we get a sense of community (call near) as the context for mission. The witness has created community and out of that community will come even more testimony and sharing, even in “strange and dangerous places.”

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective—a Theology* (Westminster Press), Letty M. Russell has written: “If we adopt the stance that the form of ministry of the church is derivative from its functions as a participant in God’s Mission or traditioning action, it follows that there will be many models of ministry, both within one Christian community and across the world.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Send me, Lord, as You will...”

Thank you to all of our military service members, veterans, and their families for your sacrifice, courage and honor.

We remember you in prayer with love and respect.

