

August 6, 2017

Lesson 10: Called to Witness

Scripture: Acts 1;6; 7; Focus is 6: 1-8

Context:

Our lessons for the month of August come from the Book of Acts. Acts has commonly been referred to as the “history book” of the church. Exegetically it starts off following Jesus’ ascension to the heavens where he commissions the disciples to go and spread his name throughout the region. He gives them the charge to “witness” to all the places they go: Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and all the ends of the earth.¹ Following these words given by Jesus, we hear of the day of Pentecost in chapter two and how the Holy Spirit filled the early believers

The composition of the Book of Acts came sometime between A.D. 70 and 100 somewhere in the Mediterranean world.² The writer is also the author of the Gospel of Luke.³ According to church tradition, the writer was “Luke,” someone who knew the early disciples and was part of the early church tradition.⁴ As one goes through Acts, you note that it is a succession of stories. From the apostles, the birth of the early church, the conversion of Paul, and the missionary journeys, you catch a glimpse of how the Christian church was distinguishing itself and finding God in their midst. An important note about the Book of Acts is that it comes at a time when there is not one Christian church, but multiple Christian churches. This is not the same as denominations. The early church had people from all backgrounds with different religious backgrounds. There were Jewish Christians who still wanted to observe aspects of the different sects of Judaism. There were Gentiles who were intrigued by the concept of “one God” and jumped into the tradition. There were also people who practice multiple religions, and included themselves in the early church to have their bases covered. The time of Jesus was still a time of polytheism where there were multiple gods to be worshipped in multiple ways.

A major purpose of the Book of Acts was to help the early Christians as they awaited the parousia (the return of Christ.) Following the resurrection many of the early church awaited Christ’s return to lead them. The Book of Acts though acted as a way for them to remember that Christ was with them and that they were to continue being the church in the midst of that time.

The specific pericope we focus on today looks at some of the tension that takes place in the early church. As the number of followers increased, so did some of the tension between the different groups. Some widows were being overlooked and some perceived that it was because they spoke a different language. As the Twelve called a meeting they ask that seven individuals be brought forward to help with that concern. Soon they had picked Stephen, a noted man, and several others to take on this special task. After they are selected, hands are laid upon them and they are prayed over. And

¹ Acts 1:8; NRSV.

² William H. Willimon, “Acts,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 1988), 1.

³ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴ *Ibid.* 1.

then things return back to normal even leading in the conversion of several priests. We hear that Stephen is exceptional and that he stood out in his abilities and endowment with gifts. Later we hear that Stephen is stoned to death for his activity in leading the Christian church. He becomes one of the first Christian martyrs known in the Christian world

Application:

This passage has several noteworthy things brought to our attention. We see the early church doing things that the body of Christ should be doing: learning how to communicate with their differences, helping the more vulnerable, and empowering people to serve other with their gifts and talents. There is attention to the fact that each person in the early church has a role to fulfill.

The first thing we notice is that when conflict arose, the people came together to discuss the issues. I am sure that that there was whispering behind closed doors, “parking lot” conversations in the market place, and people who might have concealed their feelings but internally seethed (or others who were very vocal about how they felt). But they came together to discuss the issues in their faith community. As I think of the conferencing that undergirds our United Methodist polity, I come to this passage and realize that conflict is not a bad thing. We need conflict to help us figure out who we are and what is important to us, especially as a people of faith. What should distinguish people of faith is that we be willing to have conversations and to deeply listen to one another. In my own life, I have seen that when people refuse to engage in counseling or discussing difficult issues with others it leads to even more conflict over time. Here we are reminded that the Holy Spirit works when we are able to be honest about the issues and think about creative solutions to help us move forward.

Another great part of this passage is the discussion of the widows that were overlooked in the daily food service. The early church was involved in taking care of those who may have struggled financially. Widows were especially in a difficult situation as when their husbands died, they may not have necessarily received a stipend or means of living. But the early church couldn't let them be forgotten. As I read this passage, I could not help but think of different ministries that seek to help others. In the past few months, I've been particularly amazed by the Respite Care Ministry at FUMC Dothan. Respite Care specifically focuses on those who are going through dementia and other memory impairment diseases. Each day the church opens its doors to people so that they have a place to do things like listen to music, eat good food, play balloon volleyball, and so much more. Some of the members at my church also organize a dinner or event for their caregivers. It is a life-giving ministry that I truly believe reflects the compassion of our Lord who spent time with so many people.

The dedication of the volunteers and coordinators to me also represents the final part of this passage that is so important. Like Stephen and the six who are chosen to lead this endeavor, these people have a passion to use their gifts and serve people. As they do so, more people come to see our church as a place that cares for all of God's children from birth to 100 and beyond. People are able to see that people are truly cared about as they watch these people light up about serving people with all sorts of needs. That is the same for any ministry that we have in our churches. People should see that our passion in our faith doesn't just come from “recruiting more members,” but from serving other people and ensuring that everyone has a place. God has given all of us gifts and talents to

serve and lead. We should rejoice that we have those and use them to the best of our ability.

What ways do you handle conflict in your church? What ministries in your churches do you think share God's love? And are there ones for people of all different ages, backgrounds, and needs? What makes you come alive in serving our Lord? Today we hear all those questions addressed in the early church's history meaning that we have a roadmap for how we continue to live into our calling to be the church.

Associate Pastor

First United Methodist Church

1380 W. Main St.

Dothan, AL 36301

Office (334) 793-3555 ext. 240

E-mail: hunter@fumcdothan.org

