

“Our ‘ACTS’: Like a Rock”

Acts 7:55-60; 1 Peter 2:9; John 14:12-14

Before we get started on today’s ‘exercise in theology’ (hopefully not ‘in futility!’) I want to start with a few questions. These are ‘toss ups.’ Don’t be shy. First: True or False. “Easter is a one-day event.” **False.** Unfortunately, too many think it in this way. Easter is actually a liturgical *season* which lasts some 50 days.

OK, second: That 50-day Easter season culminates in the observance of...? **Pentecost.** A name which comes from the Greek for the period of time: “*Pente-koste.*” “[the] *Fiftieth* [day]” And relative to that day, Pentecost is generally referred to as the church’s ... **birthday.** (One of our members was SO excited about this ‘birthday celebration’ that she wanted to throw the party this past Sunday... but we told her she’d *have* to wait a month...)

And finally, those early days of the church following its ‘birth’ are chronicled in the Biblical book of... **Acts.** AKA, the ‘Acts’ of the ... **Apostles.** OK! Very good! You pass! Just wanted to make sure you hadn’t gotten too lazy in my absence... ☺

My POINT for this little ‘quiz?’ Well, for the rest of these days in the **season** of Easter leading up to **Pentecost** we will be giving special emphasis to the book of **Acts...** the ‘ACTS’ of the Apostles. And should we have ANY doubt that this 2000 y.o. history of our church predecessors isn’t relevant, I’d offer to you this description of the purpose of the book of Acts that I came across:

*“To **guide** the **church** in its **continuing mission** by describing how the Holy Spirit empowered the **apostles** to **spread their witness on Christ’s behalf** to the **world.**”* If THIS church ever needed ‘guidance’ in our ‘continuing mission’ to ‘spread our witness on Christ’s behalf’ to the ‘world’ of our ‘mission/MorganField,’ it is NOW. For whether you think so or not, you and I are ALSO called to be ‘**apostles**’--“*An ardent supporter... sent on a mission... to advocate an important belief.*” We just need a little ‘encouragement’ to be more ‘ardent’... to understand our ‘mission’... of how to better ‘advocate our important beliefs.’ Which we can only do as we are, as those earliest believers were, ‘empowered by the Holy Spirit.’

And so, as we ponder just just how God is calling us, as individual believers, to 'ACT' as current-day 'apostles'... by the power of the Spirit... I would suggest three ways that come from our three passages. All three relate to our 'tudes'... no, not our 'dudes,' or our 'feuds,' or our 'moods'... but our 'tudes.' Our **atti-tude... apti-tude... alti-tude**. The first one we will consider is our...

ATTITUDE. OK, let's see if any of us needs an 'attitude adjustment.' NO, not the one that refers to adult beverages... tho' I guess we *could* refer to our time of worship as 'happy hour'... After all, we ARE all about being filled with the 'Spirit'... ☺ Seriously though, when we consider the words of Peter to the church, how does it affect your 'attitude' toward God? How do those words make you feel concerning your status in God's eyes? Peter says **"to you who believe"** in Jesus Christ, **"you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people."** (1 Peter 2:9) Wow. YOU are 'chosen' by God to be a 'royal priesthood,' a 'holy nation'... GOD'S VERY OWN PEOPLE! And you thought it was so good to be chosen for a carnival krewe!! We're talking TRUE royalty here!

HOWEVER... there IS more to the verse, isn't there! With our lofty position as *royalty*, there comes *responsibility*... a job *description* for our job *title*. We are **PICKED for a PURPOSE**. And that is... **"...in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."** (1 Peter 2:9)

As God's 'own chosen people,' it can be easy for those of us who have long-term connections to a community of faith to have an attitude of **complacency**. 'Well my family has been in this church for generations.' 'I was baptized in this church.' 'I am on my church's board, teach SS, belong to two different Bible studies.' Which is all well and good. But friends, it is pretty useless to God to be 'chosen' by the Father if you are 'frozen' in your faith. I KNOW that people out in that community know exactly what great folks you are. But do they know WHY you're so great? Because of what YOU have accomplished in your life? You KNOW what they say about a 'self-made man'? He has a FOOL for a maker! OR, do people know, from YOU, that you are who you are **by the GRACE of God!** Do you take seriously the charge by this same Peter in very next chapter, **"always be prepared to give the reason for the hope that you have..."** (1 Peter 3:15)

At our Thursday morning 4:8 group just this past week, a man who obviously knew several of our group commented as he went past, 'Wow, this must be a pretty 'high-powered' meeting!' And before he got out of earshot, I quickly quipped back (one of those few occasions in which I thought fast on my feet... well, pretty close to my feet...), '*No, we're just here consulting that 'higher power!' ...God IS good!*

Now, am I saying that we always have to have that snappy little spiritual 'zinger' ready for every occasion? NO. But, how often does the name of 'God,' or 'Jesus,' or the 'Spirit,' or 'faith,' or 'church' enter into your everyday vocabulary? As a 'royal ambassador' for the King of kings and Lord of lords, how often do YOU "***proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.***" (1 Peter 2:9)?

In addition to the manner in which our **attitude** shapes our 'ACTS' as Jesus' followers, we should also be mindful about our God-given **APTITUDE**. What is your understanding of your innate **Ability** to serve God? What do you think about your own personal **Capacity** to 'proclaim the mighty acts' of the 'Light of the world, Jesus Christ?

The answer to those questions come straight from the Savior's mouth. In our Gospel reading, Jesus assures His followers, "***Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these...***" (John 14:12)

OK, let's think about this statement. 'The one who believes in me will do the works that I do... and, more than that, will do even greater things...' Let me ask you this: How many of you believe in the Scriptures? OK... How many of you believe in this *particular* Scripture? How many of you have the 'audacity' to believe that you... small little human being that you are... could have the 'capacity,' the 'ability'... the **aptitude**... to perform as great, or even *greater*, miracles as did Jesus? There is a familiar 'companion' verse from Paul that goes >> well with this one... one which we love to SAY, but do we BELIEVE: "***I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.***" (Philippians 4:13)

Isn't Jesus saying that you and I, by virtue of our belief in Him, could calm a storm? Heal the sick? Raise the dead? Sounds pretty far-fetched, wouldn't you say? But what does Jesus say next? "***I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.***" (John 14:13) As that 'royal priesthood' we spoke of earlier, we have access to the very

same **power** our Almighty King demonstrated through His Son, the Prince of Peace. And as we embark on the task of building His kingdom... on a little plot of land out on Corbina Road... we are most certainly going to need every bit of that 'power.' As we seek to bring glory to the Father, Son, and Spirit in this church's mission and ministry, there is going to be MUCH that we will be 'asking in Christ's name' to be done. They may not involve 'calming storms' or 'healing the sick,' but still ways in which God's **miraculous power** will be displayed. THROUGH OUR FAITH. By believing that Christ is working through us. By believing in those words of Paul: ***"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."*** (Philippians 4:13) Please repeat that with me... 'Some' things? No. 'ALL things.'

It was just such **strength** and **miraculous power** that Stephen displayed in the face of such persecution and pain. As he stood there before that angry crowd, knowing that he could well be facing a violent death, how was he able to exhibit such calm and fortitude? Because of his '**ALTITUDE.**' Because of where he kept his focus... not **down** to the ground, but **up** to the skies. Stephen was sustained by the confidence that his Lord would not allow him to be brought **down** to defeat, but that he would, in the end, be '**high** and lifted up'... just as Jesus was. In the words of our passage from Acts, we read that ***"...filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God."*** (Acts 7:55)

This vision was not one that Stephen kept to himself. In spite of the rising hostility of the crowd around him, He would not back down. He proclaimed to them, ***"Look ... I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"*** (Acts 7:56) Even as that disbelieving lynch mob covered their ears, denying the truth that was being proclaimed, indeed, being lived out, right before them... as they began to pelt his body with stone after stone... the faithful disciple continued to look to his faithful Savior, using some of the very same words that Jesus did when he was facing a cruel, vengeful death at the hands of those who turned a deaf ear to His truth: ***"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."*** (Acts 7:59) And in his final testimony to his focus on Jesus, Stephen's last words were ones of compassion for his executioners... just as His Lord had spoken from 'high' on a cross: ***"Lord, do not hold this sin against them."*** (Acts 7:60) 'Father, forgive them...' Throughout this whole brutal experience,

this young man of deep faith bore witness to the words of Hebrews: ***“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.”*** (Heb. 12:2)

So what do you and I have to learn from Stephen’s powerful example? For the truth of the matter is none of us in this room is very likely to EVER be persecuted to the level of this historic martyr. And yet, we do face trials each day that test our faith. We do encounter those who turn a deaf ear to the truth of the Gospel. We do experience deep hurt at the hands... and lips... of others.

And so, just as Stephen ‘elevated’ the level of his faith by focusing on Jesus, so should we. May OUR lips continue to bear witness to the reality of the risen Lord Jesus... no matter what others may do or say. Let us live as those who can one day say with confidence, as Stephen did, “Lord, receive my spirit.” And until that day, let us exhibit the type of forgiveness that he did.

As we consider how to live out such remarkable faith and mercy, I would lift up to you one last story. At that same men’s study, we have begun consideration of Desmond Tutu’s book The Book of Forgiving. In its preface, we read of a young girl who is testifying to a government commission concerning the brutal murder of her father during that horrendous time of apartheid in South Africa. The killers who committed this horrific crime had yet to be brought to justice. After describing in gut-wrenching detail just the manner in which her father was killed, the 19 year-old, who was only 8 at the time of her dad’s death, stunned both those listeners and us readers by declaring, “I would love to know who killed my father. We want to forgive them. Both my brother and I want to forgive them, but we don’t know who to forgive.”

This, my friends, is the type of forgiveness and unconditional love that Stephen showed. This is the type of action only possible by the miracle-working power of God. This is the type of faith that confidently declares that our spirit is not ours, but in the Lord’s hands. How can we have such a confidence? Like the author Hebrews says... ***“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.”*** (Heb. 12:2)