

“Are Our ‘Acts’ of the ‘Apostles?’”

John 13:33-35; Acts 11:1-18

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May 15, 2022 – 5th Sun. of Easter

As most all of you are *painfully* aware of, I rarely saw a ‘pun’ I didn’t like. Like last week’s reference to how God’s imagery of ‘sheep’ was ‘mutton’ to take lightly. Another linguistic feature that brings me great joy is what are known as ‘double entendres.’ Where a particular phrase can be thought of in two very different ways. Here’s a few that come from newspaper headlines... NOT from our local papers. From a zoo, it was reported that “Panda Mating Fails: Veterinarian Takes Over.” (Hopefully not literally). In an industrial mining area, the headline read “Miners Refuse to Work After Death.” Clearly, not their own. Another read that a “New Obesity Study Looks for a Larger Test Group.” Number, or size? A picture of young kids working with food in class declared that “Children Make Nutritious Snacks.” And finally, “Criminals Get Nine Months in Violin Case.” I’m guessing this was about the ‘crime,’ and not the ‘punishment.’

One of the books we read from today describes the life of the early Christian Church... which we most commonly refer to as the Book of... ACTS. Its full name, of course, is “*The Acts of the Apostles.*” In the passage we read, we heard of how disturbed some of those first ‘apostles,’ or ‘disciples’ of Christ were when they heard that Peter had been preaching the Good News of the Gospel not only to fellow Jews, but to GENTILES. Those pagan, uncircumcised, ‘unclean’ followers of any god BUT the “One true God of Israel,” YHWH. People of other ‘tribes and tongues’ who were SO DIFFERENT that God’s CHOSEN people. Peter needed to take care of his own first... not these unworthy foreigners!

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Their brother apostle, however, had a different way of looking at their calling from God. How in a vision he was a large sheet coming down from heaven being held at its 'four corners' by 'unclean' animals. And that he was commanded to eat them by God, because it was the Father ALONE who determined one's 'cleanliness.' And further, that Peter was called to go with some 'uncircumcised' men from a foreign country (equivalent to being 'un-baptized' in our Christian tradition) to save them, and their household with the message of salvation in Christ. He defended his evangelization of these 'outsiders' by saying that

>> *"If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?"* (Acts 11:17) 'If GOD would treat us the same as fellow believers in the same Lord and Savior, who am I to do anything different... and therefore, undermine the work of the One I am called to serve?'

So as we consider how we are to follow in the patterns of the early church... the 'Acts of the Apostles', let us consider which examples we follow. Peter? Or Peter's critics? By the way we might seek to exclude those we don't deem 'worthy' to share the Gospel with, are we siding with those 'good Jews?' Or, by being inclusive of all, are we following Peter's lead? As we give thought to just how our actions today bear witness to the historic, trail-blazing faith of those first believers, we must ask ourselves each day, **"Are OUR 'Acts'... of the 'Apostles?'**

[As we consider how not EVERYONE in the early church had the best ideas of...]

As we consider how not EVERYONE in the early church had the best ideas of just how to GROW the church... something we too might learn from... let us go back to the source. The author and perfecter of our Christian faith: JESUS CHRIST I think it no mere 'coincidence' that the companion Gospel reading for this Acts passage... which calls into question the early disciples ability to show God's love without any prejudice or qualification... comes from **John 13**. In case you don't have that chapter on your 'Bible trivia' list, it describes the events of the Upper Room before Jesus' crucifixion. Not only the institution of the Lord's Supper, but something just as important: "A New Commandment."

Wait a minute. 'A NEW commandment?' Didn't some hotshot lawyer try to get Jesus in trouble by asking him which (of the 10) was the 'greatest' commandment? So what's with this 'new' commandment? Is this one to follow the 11th commandment? 'Thou shalt not worship over one hour?' 😊 I know that I get in trouble when I break that one...

As you will recall, that 'new command' Jesus gives is this: "**Love one another ... As I have loved you.**" (John 13:34) But as you hear our Lord refer to this as something 'new,' did you think to yourself, 'SELF... haven't I heard this one before?' You may not know just from where, but probably you remember something like this from Matthew 22:36-40, when that aforementioned 'legal eagle' tried to trip Jesus up. Who thinks very quickly on his feet to tell him that the greatest commandment is... "**Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength**"... and the second is very much like it, "**Love your neighbor as yourself.**" Which actually comes from the Old Testament, in *Leviticus 19:18*.

So WHAT's the difference? What makes Jesus' reference in today's passage 'new?' Two things. One, it changes the one we are to love from one's 'neighbor' to 'one another.' Think about it. Who is our 'neighbor.' Think in terms of the one you would most naturally, the 'next door' variety. Someone who most likely looks much like you do. Probably very similar in socio-economic status, in background, in common interests. One with whom you likely share a lot in common.

'One another,' however? That is MUCH broader. Basically, EVERYONE! A homeless black-skinned male. A pregnant single brown-skinned female. A yellow-skinned teenager with tats. A white-skinned bedraggled beggar on the side of the road. And oft-times, that 'one another' whom we are to love Looks and ACTS way too much LIKE us. Sometimes, the hardest 'one another' to love is the one closest to us... in our own household, or family, or workplace... or church...

The other difference in the 'new' way that Jesus wants us to love, besides broadening the 'net' of 'WHO,' is 'HOW.' Rather than using the 'human' standard of loving someone else 'as yourself,' Jesus raises the bar, if you will. Love 'as I have loved you,' says our Lord.

I think that this is a VERY big distinction. In our current culture, there are FAR too many people who don't love themselves AT ALL. Heck, there are sure times when I don't 'LIKE' myself very much. Ultimately, my regard for myself, and for others, has to be based on a LOVE so much greater than my own. ***"For God so loved the WORLD... ME... that he gave his only Son..."*** If God would make that kind of sacrifice for me, then how much more should I sacrifice for others?! Jesus *embodies...* quite literally... the kind of **unconditional love** we are to have for 'one another' ... ALL of the 'one anothers' we encounter in any given day...

Now, as I say these words, I realize that I am, in many ways, ‘preaching to the choir.’ Knowing most of you as I do, you are not, as a rule, judgmental or conditional in your love for one another, regardless of age, race, gender, or socio-economic status. But how about the world OUT THERE? How are they doing with ‘loving one another’... as God, in Christ, has loved them?

That is why it is SO important for US to be ‘salt and light’ to a world poisoned by darkness and hatred. To stand up against injustices, and hatred, and bigotry, and _____. Because if we are not a part of the solution to the pain and suffering in our world, then we are part of the problem. Because when one of our fellow man and woman are hurting, we too should hurt. And if we are SERIOUS about sharing the Good News of the Gospel with the lost and alone, we must FIRST ‘show them the love!’ In Jesus’ words, **“By THIS shall ALL people KNOW that you are MY disciples, if you love one another.”** If I’ve said it once I’ve said it a 100 times, *“Your life is the only Bible that some people will ever read.”*

As I shared on my Thursday devo on FB Live, the previous Thursday (May 5th, NDP), I had the blessing of reading a few pages of a ‘human Bible,’ by the name of Ben Watson. As many of you, I was both surprised and humbled to have had the privilege of sharing the front page of Am Press with Mr. Watson on Friday. **[pic]** (And I later figured out why they picked my picture: we were so much alike... well, aside from the obvious skin color difference... two preachers with their hands out... 😊) Having been blessed by the opportunity to hear him ‘up close and personal’ at the NDP observance in the LC Civic Center, I was so impressed by what a man of strength, of joy, of dedication to family, and most of all, his love for his Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

[But what solidified my already great respect and regard for Mr. Watson was...]

But what solidified my already great respect and regard for Mr. Watson was the 'parting gift' I received at that event. There was available on the tables, for >> the first four to take advantage of it, a free copy of his book, Under Our Skin. (Hey, as a pastor, you KNOW that they had me at 'free book'!)

Now, at first, I was a little leary, especially when the prologue began with the killing of Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager, by a white police officer in Ferguson Missouri, and the racial unrest that ensued. Was this going to be yet another angry black commentary on what was, admittedly, a tragedy that is happening far too often in the black community. One that will plunge me even deeper into the guilt I feel for in some ways being complicit to their centuries-long pain and suffering.

And yet, not surprisingly, I found a very even-handed, fair, and honest assessment of this terrible event... and all that has contributed to such discrimination and violence. He wrote of his anger at ongoing injustice... while acknowledging the cultural glorification of confrontations with police and lies about invincibility of young blacks. He expressed his own personal fears, while putting himself in the place of the officer and family, and the scrutiny that they still endure. Watson was honest about his own prejudices, while lamenting that of others. He shared his own struggles between being 'hope-less' and 'hope-ful.'

But what was most powerful to me was his closing words of the prologue: >> "(Finally) I'm ENCOURAGED because ultimately the problem is not a SKIN problem, But a SIN problem. SIN is the reason we rebel against, or abuse, our authority. SIN is the reason we are racist, prejudiced, or lie to cover for our own. I'm ENCOURAGED because God has provided a solution for sin through his Son Jesus, and with it, a transformed heart and mind. One that's capable of looking

past the outward and seeing what's truly important in every human being. The cure for these tragedies is not education or exposure. It's the Gospel. I'm ENCOURAGED because the Gospel gives mankind hope."

'The Gospel gives mankind hope.' The kind of hope that convinces us all that it is not just a SKIN problem... but a SIN problem. The sin of pride that even goes back to those first believers who took way too much pride in their human heritage... rather than their heritage of FAITH. A lineage that we ALL share in... from Adam to Jesus. Looking past the outward and seeing what is truly important in every human being.

I came to appreciate the depth of character in this man by reading his book. In the same way, may we come to appreciate the depth and character of our Jesus by reading HIS 'Book. And in turn, may others see the 'character' WE display by being in God's Word. The Word Written and the Word made Flesh. As we live by BOTH of those 'Words,' we are assured of their truth: ***"By this everyone will KNOW that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."*** May THAT love be OUR 'Acts of the Apostles'...

CHARGE: ***"How good and pleasant (beautiful) it is when brothers (and sisters) live together in UNITY."*** (Ps. 133:1)

Not long after began writing his book, Ben Watson & wife welcomed new child.

Filling out paperwork, "race." Chose 'other'.... HUMAN .

"You're my brother, you're my sister, So take me by the hand

Together we will work until He comes There's no foe that can defeat us

*When we're walking side by side. As long as there is love **We will stand."***

Now the **apostles** and the **believers** who were in Judea **heard** that the **Gentiles** had also **accepted** the **word of God**. ² So when **Peter** went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers **criticized him**, ³ saying, ‘**Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?**’

⁴ Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step..., saying, ⁵ ‘I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a **vision**. There was something like a **large sheet** coming down from heaven, being lowered by its **four corners**; and it came close to me. ⁶ As I looked at it closely I saw **four-footed animals**, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. ⁷ I also heard a voice saying to me, “Get up, Peter; kill and eat.”

⁸ But I replied, “By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.” ⁹ But a second time the voice answered from heaven, “**What God has made clean, you must not call profane.**” ¹⁰ This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven.

¹¹ At that very moment **three men**, sent to me **from Caesarea**, arrived at the house where we were. ¹² The **Spirit told me to go with them** and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house. ¹³ **He told us** how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, “Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called **Peter**; ¹⁴ he **will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.**”

¹⁵ And as I began to speak, the **Holy Spirit fell upon them** just as it had upon us at the beginning. ¹⁶ And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, “**John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.**” ¹⁷ If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, **who was I that I could hinder God?**

¹⁸ When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, ‘Then **God has given** even to the **Gentiles** the **repentance** that **leads to life.**’

Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, “Where I am going, you cannot come.” ³⁴ I give you a **new commandment**, that you **love one another**. **Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.** ³⁵ By **THIS everyone will know** that **you are my disciples**, **IF you have love for one another.**’

CALL TO CONFESSION: The author of today's second hymn, "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," is Charles Wesley, one of the greatest hymnwriters of all time. In no small part due to the manner in which he communicates the **truth** of our **Christian faith**. Jesus IS 'the joy of heaven to earth come down.' He IS 'all compassion... pure, unbounded love.' Wesley also speaks to OUR condition: we need to find the 'promised rest' of God to 'enter into every trembling heart.' We must pray to our Almighty God to 'deliver' us, to 'take away our love of sinning'... and to 'set our hearts at liberty' from our bondage to sin and doubt.

Therefore, as we strive to have God 'FIX in us His humble dwelling,' let us come before him with our prayers of confession. First together, and then in silence, let us confess that which stands in the way of 'letting us ALL of HIS life receive'...

ASSURANCE OF PARDON: May those closing words of Wesley's be our own:

"Finish, then, your new creation, O Lord. True and spotless let us be.

Let us see your great salvation, perfectly restored in Thee."

By the blood of Christ, our sins are washed clean; we are a new creation, 'perfectly restored' by the Divine love and excelling grace of our Almighty, all-merciful God.