

**“The Difference that Makes the Difference”**

Dear Friends, Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus.

Go ahead and find your Bibles (if you don't already have them) and turn to the book of Acts. We're in the second week of a series that is going to take us through a good part of the summer. Today we're in chapters three and four, the story of Peter and John, the healing of a man who was a cripple, and of the resulting trial and witness of those two apostles.

If you were here last week, Pastor Judy, as she led us into this series, pointed out how the Book of Acts is titled “The Acts of the Apostles,” but it could actually (more accurately) be titled “The Acts of the Holy Spirit” or (maybe even) “The Acts of the Church.”

The apostles (after all) were the church. The people made up the Body of Christ. And it was the Holy Spirit who empowered them, who encouraged them, who enabled them to do the things they did. In that way, what happened back then (with them) can still happen today (with us).

Our hope is (during this series) that we'll be able to make those connections. More than just a Bible study, learning the stories of the early church, our hope is that this series will be an encouragement to all of us to think more about what it means for us today.

Now, (having said that), I want to be careful that we don't think we can simply take what happened in the Book of Acts and drop it into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and apply it. It's not that simple. If we were to do that, we'd find that (in some cases) it would be very encouraging and (in other cases) very discouraging.

For example, as I read through the story of the Day of Pentecost (from last week), I think about what happened when Peter stood up to preach. It says 3,000 people came to faith. His sermon was only four minutes long. (Maybe that's why so many joined?) I don't know. I've been doing this for 29 years and it hasn't happened. I can read that story and easily get discouraged.

Or, I can read the story in today's text about how Peter healed the man who was a cripple. It's an amazing story! It actually happened! We hear it and we say “Isn't that great!” And then we wonder why we can't do it. (I wish I could. I wish we could.) Why the disconnect? It can be discouraging.

What we need to remember (and we find good examples in the stories today) is that there are some things in the Book of Acts that are descriptive (they describe for us what took place) and there are some things that are prescriptive, things that ought to be happening in us.

Chapter one, (for example), the ascension of Jesus: there was only one ascension of Jesus. Luke gives us a descriptive account of how it happened. Chapter nine, the conversion of Saul: Luke describes for us how this persecutor of the church became a believer. Now, conversions still happen (and we'll talk about that when we get there), but the story (of Saul's conversion) is a one-time descriptive account.

But other events, even as they describe what happened back then, are also intended to prescribe for us how we are to live today. The book of Acts is filled with those kinds of passages, and the stories we read today are good examples.

Now, we're not going to have time to go through every little detail. These chapters are loaded. As you read through them each week, watch for the details. We're not going to do that. What I do want to do today (based on the chapters we've read) is to touch on three characteristics of the early church that made it stand out and that prescribe for us how we're to stand out.

Three phrases I want you to remember today; three little words. They cared. They were confident. And they were committed. They cared. They were confident. And they were committed. (Say it with me.) They cared. They were confident. And they were committed.

Let's take them one at a time. What made the church different? What was different about the early church that enabled it to make a difference in the world? Number one, the people cared.

Look at the story and the way it plays out in chapter three. This is one of the things that set them apart. Watch how it develops. It's a simple progression. Try to picture it: Peter and John walking toward the temple.

There's this man (lying there) who was crippled from birth. Now, we don't know if they had seen him before or not. It doesn't matter. What we do know is what happened. It says they saw him and he asked them for money.

Now, there were probably many others (that day) who had walked by, but who never even saw him. They saw him, but they didn't really see him. (You know how that works.) They just walked by. It's easy to do. We've all done it. I'm sure it happened. It says Peter and John saw him. That's where it started. They saw his hurt.

Then it says, "Peter looked straight at him, as did John, and said 'Look at us!' So the man gave them his attention."

Now, this might seem like it doesn't matter, but it does. The picture we're given is that Peter and John were looking him in the eye. "Look at us" they said. (It says he did.)

Interestingly, it's the same description we're given in chapter one when Jesus ascended and the disciples stood there "looking into the heavens." They were staring (it says), looking straight up. Same thing in chapter seven when Stephen is being stoned; it says he "looked up to the heavens and saw Jesus at the right hand." It was with a fixed gaze; very intense.

Peter and John not only saw this man's hurt, but they felt his hurt. They gave him their complete attention. They saw the need. They took the time. They felt what he felt, and then it happened. It says, "They took him by the hand, helped him up, and instantly he was able to walk." In the early church, the people cared. They cared.

What does that look like for us, in this age of technology and information, when we not only can (but actually do) see it every day? Turn on the news and it's there. Turn on your computer or laptop, even your phone, it's easy to see. It's (also) easy to tune it out and pretend it's not real, not only in our culture, but even in the church.

Just think, (for a moment), about the struggles represented in this room alone. Physical struggles, emotional struggles, spiritual struggles; family issues, challenges in marriages. It's not only out in the world where it happens, with others. It happens also right here, with us.

Now, (keep that in mind) and let's take a step back and think about what's happening in the story. (We're in chapter three.) Turn back to chapter two and what just happened? It was the Day of Pentecost. How many people came to faith? About three thousand. That's pretty good church growth.

Do you remember what happens in chapter four? Peter and John end up in prison, waiting to go on trial, and it says (as a result), the number of believers grew to about five thousand. It keeps on growing.

And so, what happens right in the middle, between chapters two and four? What happens is this story of Peter and John taking time for this cripple. This man who had been begging for years, no one really taking the time, and they took the time. They cared.

Here's the deal, and it's a truth that is no different for us today than it was for them back then. Tremendous church growth; people coming to faith, a descriptive account that is prescriptive for us; it's simple, (and listen carefully), here's how it works. Those who are most effective in reaching the many are also most passionate about reaching the one. Those who are most effective in reaching the many are also most passionate about reaching the one.

Do you know what they did (in those days) with babies they didn't want? They didn't have birth control like we do. They didn't do abortions. Do you know what they did? They threw the babies away. They tossed them in the trash and let them die. The Christians (in the first century) were known to go into those trash-heaps and pick up the babies no one else wanted.

When there was a plague in Rome and all of the people left the city to avoid the plague, it was the Christians who stayed behind and cared for the people that everyone else had left.

Do you know what I think has happened over the years? This is probably too simplistic and maybe not even fair, but a brief survey of church history gives us a snapshot. (Just think about it, and this is very high level.)

About 250 AD, (a couple hundred years after the church started), a man named Cyprian of Carthage began exploring ways to begin separating the clergy from the laity. And so, for the first time, (in a simplistic way) there were two "classes" (if you will) of Christians being set up, (the laity and the clergy).

In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Constantine comes along, legalizes the Christian faith and begins to build buildings where the Christians can gather, places for the clergy to do their work. Not too much later, they began building monasteries and there was an even greater separation between the people and the priests.

You come to the reformation period (14<sup>th</sup> & 15<sup>th</sup> centuries) and denominationalism begins to explode; a different kind of separation, but real, nonetheless. Fast forward to the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, to the industrial revolution, and churches start looking more like businesses run by the professionals. If you need help, you can still get it. But you need (first) to find the buildings, the place where it happens, because the help will probably not be finding you. . . . And somewhere along the way (in a very simplistic way), in its efforts to reach the masses for Christ, the Church (as a whole) lost its compassion for the many individuals (with deep and lasting hurts) for whom our Lord Jesus died.

That was the mark of the early church. That's the prescriptive account God has given to us. Agree with that summary (or not), it doesn't matter. In the early church, it was happening. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century church, it needs to happen. Number one, they cared. Number two, they were confident. They were confident.

Go through the story. Peter and John were not afraid. Even if they were, it didn't stop them. Time after time, they continue to speak the name. They were confident in the name of the one who had saved them.

Go through the story. It happens again and again. Chapter three (verse 6): Peter says, "Silver and gold I don't have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk."

Jump to verse 16 (speaking to the people), Peter says, "By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has given this man healing as you can all see,"

In chapter four, it's the same thing. Verse 7: "They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: 'By what power or what name did you do this?'"

Verse 9: (Peter responds), "If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and asked how he was healed, then know this: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed."

Verse 12: (again, Peter is speaking), "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved."

Look at verse 16 (the religious leaders), they're on the defensive: "Everyone living in Jerusalem knows they have done an outstanding miracle, and we cannot deny it. But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn these men to speak no longer to anyone in this name."

Verse 18 (it continues): "Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. " And then you come to verse 30 (near the end), Peter and John are praying for the believers in light of the persecution that is beginning to happen, and they say, "Lord, stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus."

Now, I don't want to insult your intelligence, but do you get the point? There's something about the name of Jesus that makes all the difference. There's something about the name of Christ that changes the game.

All throughout the Book of Acts, lives are changed by the name of Christ. All throughout Christian history, lives are transformed when people speak and hear his name.

The question is simple: "Are we speaking the name of Jesus often enough? Are we confident (in our witness) in the name of the one who saves?" Or do we speak more generically, (more generally), telling people we'll pray for them, or we'll be thinking of them, or telling them we go to church?

Now, don't miss the point. We all do it, including me. It's not bad. It's not a bad thing to tell people you'll be praying for them. What is bad and what we dare not do is to miss and to neglect and to even avoid opportunities to speak the name of Christ.

Along with your reading for next week, let me give you a little homework. I'd challenge you (this next week) to make a tally of how often (in your conversations with others) you actually say the name of Jesus. In your witness, in your serving, in caring for those you know, (on whatever level), how many times do you say the name of Christ?

I promise you, in doing so, it'll set you apart. You might find yourself not fitting in, maybe even wondering if it makes any difference at all. What I'll also promise you is that it will. It makes all the difference in the world. There's no other name under heaven by which God has chosen to save his world; no other name.

Don't be afraid to speak the name of Jesus. Without it, it's not the same. It's not. Be confident. Speak the name. It's the difference that makes the difference.

Number one, they cared. Number two, they were confident. And (number three), they were committed. They were committed to the glory of the God who worked through them. They were committed to doing whatever they had to do (in their lives) to give glory to God.

Now, we're not going to go through all of the stories. Throughout the book of Acts, it happens time and again. They bowed down to Peter. They praised the name of John. They thought Paul was a god. Barnabas and John Mark, they would have made them kings.

It didn't happen. How come? Because every time something happened, the disciples made it known how it had happened. This wasn't us, it was him. This wasn't Peter or John, it was Jesus.

In the story, this crippled man was healed, the word got out, and the people kept coming. What happened? Peter tells them how it happened. He gives the glory to God. He gives the credit to the One who deserves the credit.

Do you know what happens when God is given the credit? There's an attraction. (That's what happens.) People want to know. They want to find out how and who and whether it could possibly happen to them. And I'm not just talking about physical healing, (about the dramatic), but also about the not quite so dramatic.

Every one of us here today has a story. We wouldn't be here if Jesus had not played an important part in our lives. You wouldn't be here if there was nothing Jesus had done for you.

Do you know what I think? I think two things. (And this is how I'll close.) One, I think (we think) it has to be dramatic. I think (we think) my story (whatever it is), who cares? I wasn't a cripple. I wasn't a Saul. I wasn't some (extreme case) that all of a sudden was turned around, so why would I share? Why would it matter?

Here's my response. If it doesn't matter to you, it's not going to matter to them. If you think what God has done in your life isn't worth sharing, then (you're probably right), it's not worth sharing. But if what he's done (in your life) has made a difference to you, then why do we think he can't (and won't) use that (same story) to make a difference for someone else?

The world out there is hungry to hear the good news. They're hungry to hear what God is able to do. Who cares if it's dramatic? If it matters to you, it'll make a difference to them. Let God figure it out. Tell your story. Give the glory to God.

And two, it all comes down to whether or not we actually believe what we say we believe; whether we actually put our faith where we say we put our faith.

Chapter four, verse 11: this is what we say about Jesus. This is what we believe about Christ. (One of the most powerful verses in the Bible): again, Peter is talking, and he says, "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; (and then he says), salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved."

When you go home today, ask yourself if you really believe that; whether or not you honestly believe this world is in desperate need of Christ. If the answer is no, then there's no reason to share. We have nothing in this place that the world would ever want or need. But if the answer is yes, and that's the descriptive account given to us in the Book of Acts, then there's a prescriptive challenge we cannot avoid.

Three little words. They cared. They were confident. And they were committed. (Say it with me.) They cared. They were confident. And they were committed.

That's the difference that makes the difference...for them and for us. (Next week it's chapter five.) Keep reading. Let's pray.

Gracious God, we thank you for the work you have done for us in Jesus and for the witness we've been given through those early apostles. We thank you for your Holy Spirit who encourages us and empowers us to live as your people.

We pray for hearts that care, that not only see the needs of others, but that take the time to enter into those needs and make a difference. We pray for confidence to speak the name of Jesus and to not be afraid or hesitant to stand out. And we pray for a renewed commitment to use our lives in ways that give glory to you.

Lord, this is your church and we are your people. Use this study in the book of Acts to enable (each one of us) to act on behalf of Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

9:00: "Lord, You Give the Great Commission" #756 (vs. 1, 2, 4, 5)

11:00: Nicene Creed (Judy)