

Unstoppable Movement: Compassion and Courage
Acts 6-7, June 14, 2015
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Last week Pastor Dan set the context for what is happening in Acts, and what continues to happen throughout the Christian Church in our day as well. We, as followers of Jesus, are caught up in an unstoppable movement, propelled into the world by the power of the Holy Spirit. The purpose for your life and mine as foot soldiers in this movement is this: to do everything you can to advance the Kingdom of God. That is your purpose on this earth, and it is a great and noble purpose. This purpose will shape your attitudes, your decisions, your very life.

Throughout the book of Acts, there is a dual view on the work of the Holy Spirit. There's an inside view and an outside view. The inside view is how God is working inside the community. Within this fledgling church we see daily worship, sharing, generosity, growth; joy. As Pastor Dan said last week, the only weapons that can impede the progress of this movement come from the inside: Satan's tools of greed, selfishness and dishonesty. Satan can do great damage by making petty problems central, displacing the great purpose we have been given. But although Satan is powerful, the Holy Spirit is even more powerful, as he works to produce in us his fruit: love, joy, peace, patience and all the rest. Rooted in Christ, those fruits will be produced in you as you remain in him. When the Holy Spirit starts working, he is bound to do something new. It is his work that keeps this movement growing. Never forget that.

If the first view is inside, the second view is outside the church. Outside this early Christian community we see signs and wonders that point to God's work in their midst. Out in the marketplace and in the Temple courts sermons are being preached – by otherwise uneducated and ordinary folks. These powerful, Spirit-filled sermons attract crowds; they also attract trouble. We have seen this happen already: Peter and others are repeatedly arrested and even jailed, only to be let go with no more than a slap on the hand. But trouble is brewing – and today it boils over. By the end of chapter 7 and the beginning of chapter 8, a persecution against the Church has begun. But this persecution does not have its desired effect; instead of stamping out the fire it merely fans the flame as the Gospel leaps beyond the borders of Jerusalem and is spread into Judea, Samaria and beyond. Just as Jesus had told them.

It's an unstoppable movement! And the only question for you and me today is this: how will we participate? Will we simply sit back, watching from the sidelines, as the parade passes by? Or will we participate fully, as the Holy Spirit calls and directs us? That's where the action is! So we need to read these passages carefully and take them to heart. As you read (here and at home) seek God out and ask him: What have you already done for me in Christ? Be thankful! Let gratitude fill you up to overflowing. And then, on that basis ask: What are you saying to me now, Lord? What can I do about it?

In our lessons for today we find two sides of witness. In the beginning of chapter 6, a distinct ministry emerges: the ministry of compassion. And by the end of chapter 7, we see that the ministry of the Word requires courage. They go together, but it is helpful also to distinguish them. Let's take a look.

First, the ministry of compassion. Up until this point, there was one big ministry: teaching and healing. When Jesus began his ministry, that's the way he did it: teaching and healing. They went together. In the early days of the church, they continued to go together. (That's still true today.) But as the church grew, so did the logistics. It became complex. Just think: thousands of believers were meeting daily in the Temple and in homes. They were sharing meals and all their worldly goods. In particular, within the church, they were caring for those who had next to nothing, especially the widows – a very vulnerable segment of the population in those days..

In the beginning the ministry of the church wasn't really organized; it was organic – it just grew. But the time came when the growing organism we now call the church needed more organization. It needed a structure that would support its work, both inside and out. And so the apostles said, "Let's set apart the ministry of caring – particularly food distribution. Let's choose seven men, full of wisdom and the Holy Spirit for this ministry." And so they did. In Acts chapter 6 seven men, just as full of Holy Spirit and wisdom as the others, were chosen to lead this ministry – including a man named Stephen. Stephen had a great reputation within the community. Several times the Scriptures mention him as being full of the Holy Spirit, faith, wisdom and power. The call of such a person raises the importance level of this kind of ministry.

In case you are wondering, Stephen Ministry is named for this man and the caring ministry he represents. In our congregation, we now call this same ministry Caring Christians – not that you are not all caring Christians. But it's fair to say that this ministry serves as a model for all of us: calling each one here to be trustworthy, compassionate, skilled, full of faith and Christ-centered. *Trustworthy* – because when people share with you some of their deepest concerns, they need to know you are reliable and will keep their concerns confidential. *Compassionate* – not judgmental. Compassion means "suffering with;" it goes the distance. *Skilled* – caring Christians are skilled in the use of basic Christian tools like Scripture and prayer. They are *full of faith* (like Stephen), because they rely on God for wisdom and inspiration. And above all, they are *Christ-centered* – making Jesus the center and top priority of their lives. All of these characteristics are shared to some degree by all Christians, and can be further nurtured and developed.

I have to tell you that whenever our Caring Christians gather for prayer and mutual encouragement, I am so thankful for each one, and for the care and attention they give week after week to their care receivers. Compassion ministry is a true witness; it demonstrates the love of Jesus in real time, here and now, to real people. It carries forward the ministry begun in Acts 6, seen in so many ways throughout Church history. My friends, each of us is called to be a caring Christian, in some way. Compassion ministry is meant to be shared by all. So here's a challenge to each of you today: choose one person, someone for whom you might go out of your way, demonstrating the compassion of Christ. It's part of your DNA as a Christ-follower! Take time to nurture and develop your compassion-gene, through prayer and daily practice.

Compassion is one side of the dual nature of your witness. The other side is courage. Stephen, this compassionate person, was so full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom that his opponents kept losing the debate. So they brought false charges against him, claiming that he had blasphemed

against Moses and God. They brought him before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling Council, where Stephen gave his defense, telling the story of God's faithfulness from Abraham to Moses and beyond.

It was clever, what Stephen did. He simply told the family story. Every family has one – you know, the story of where your forbears came from; how grandma met grandpa; the funny uncle who was just a little different; inspirational stories of courage and faith in difficult times. Stephen simply told the family story, and as he did so, demonstrated his own reverence for Moses, for the law, for God's faithfulness. Great strategy! And of course, his listeners were just taken in because this was the family story, one they all loved and honored. As a result, Stephen showed himself to be innocent of blasphemy. He too, honored and revered the family story.

But then came the twist: Stephen did not compare his present audience to Moses but rather, to the people who complained and schemed against Moses; those who were unfaithful to God. "You!" Stephen said. "You are the same stiff-necked people who acted against Moses and against God, killing the prophets and now – even God's Son."

Now, this was not a new accusation. We've heard this before. But up until now, the anger of the people had been restrained. This time, his audience did not receive it gracefully, repentantly or even reluctantly. They were furious; and there was no wise Gamaliel standing by to advise caution. At this point, Stephen looked up and said he saw Jesus at the right hand of God – and this was the last straw for his hearers. Stephen's defense had turned things around; the accused proven innocent, and the accusers, guilty. So they covered their ears, refusing to listen. Acting in great anger, they dragged Stephen outside the city and stoned him. Witnesses watched in approval (including a young man named Saul). Like Jesus, Stephen died asking God to forgive his killers. He became the first martyr of the faith, faith which gave him the courage to speak out, even though it meant his death.

My friends, don't miss the drama of this moment, because what Stephen is telling the religious leaders is still very relevant for you and me right now. He's saying the story we're living for, whatever it is, is incomplete, misshaped and therefore, the wrong story if Jesus is not the center of it. That was true for them and it's true for us as well. So hear me, brothers and sisters. If the story you are living does not have Jesus as the center and Lord of it, it is a misshaped and wrong story. It is not the story to live for. It's not the lord to live for – nor to die for.

Compassion and courage. True witness has both sides. Stephen compassionately prayed God would forgive his killers, even as he died. At the same time, he was courageous in his witness, telling it like it is. This is the dual nature of all Christians – every one of us here is called to be compassionate; every one is called to have the courage to name the name of Jesus when the time is right. This is God's movement; it's unstoppable. And you and I are called to participate in it.

You see, people who really believe that to live is Christ and to die is gain cannot be stopped. You can't stop a people who believe that. Christian martyrs of every age have said, "You let me live, I'm going to preach Christ everywhere. Kill me? Better still: everlasting joy will be mine, and the gospel will be spread even faster in my death." So, what about us, today? Are we a people

who believe that? Do we believe that to live is Christ and to die is gain? If we are a people who are willing to give finances or time or whatever, all the way down to our very lives, then we will find ourselves amidst an unstoppable purpose. Because God is unstoppable.

Dear friends, I know many of you. I know this congregation. I know you to be compassionate people. And I am not saying that you are not also courageous in your witness. But I believe we can all grow in both compassion and courage. I challenged you earlier to find one person to whom you can show compassion. Let's amplify that challenge a little. Pray that God would show you one person, a person who needs Jesus in his/her life. Someone you know, someone to whom you can give a caring and compassionate witness. Reach out to that person and pursue that relationship. Pray for that one person, asking God to give you an opportunity to bring Jesus into your conversation. It may take time. It may take years. But think of it – if each person here were to bring one person into the Kingdom through a witness that is both compassionate and courageous, our number would double. And the way the Holy Spirit works – it could double again. That's why this movement we call the Church has persisted and grown in the last 2000 years. It is unstoppable, because the Holy Spirit is behind it, and he will give you the wisdom and the words and the opportunities for witness. You can count on it.

Let's take a moment right now to pray that God's power and love will be behind all we do as we participate in his Kingdom work. (Prayer)