

Continuing the Work of Jesus

Acts 1:1-11

We describe our calling in the Church of the Brethren as a matter of “Continuing the Work of Jesus...Peacefully. Simply. Together”. This could be a theme and tagline that could well have been taken from the beginning verses of Acts. The Acts of the Apostles, you may remember, is a follow-up volume to the Gospel of Luke, both books written to an otherwise unknown reader named Theophilus. Luke’s Gospel begins by addressing “most excellent Theophilus:” “Since I have carefully investigated everything from the beginning it seemed good...to write an orderly account for you...so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught” (Luke 1:3-4). In much the same way, the book of Acts begins, “In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen” (Acts 1:1-2).

In the early verses of chapter 1, we have the sense that the initial followers of Jesus still struggle to comprehend - to wrap their heads and their hearts around the central message of Jesus, the proclamation of a new reality, life in the unfolding kingdom of God. In other words, those first followers still struggled to understand their calling: what might it mean for them “to continue the work of Jesus”? Even after following Jesus for a number of years and observing his interactions with all manner of people, even after journeying with him and hearing him proclaim an alternative way of living, even after watching Jesus extend a welcoming embrace of gentleness, forgiveness, and grace to those pushed to the fringes of life - even through all this, the early followers of Jesus found it difficult to grasp just what Jesus was about. And so they ask, “Lord, are you at this the time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6).

It is significant to notice, however, that Jesus does not directly answer the question. Instead, his response makes it clear that their question misses the mark. It is as if Jesus is telling them, “Now is the time to step forward, to move beyond the limited understandings of the past”. While many in their day believed that Israel, as the chosen people of God, was destined for special privilege, Jesus reminds his followers that he has been modeling a markedly different viewpoint. Jesus has been calling his people to live a life of servanthood. Jesus proclaims and models in a multitude of ways, just how God’s touch upon our lives brings with it not a special status, but rather a unique calling: to be light in a world of darkness, salt in a world of blandness, hope in a world of despair, peace in a world of division and violence, grace in a world of judgment and fear. Jesus displays a way of living based not upon coercive domination but rather liberating love, not upon top-down control but instead bottom-up service, not upon angry fists of judgment but rather wounded hands of compassion and grace.

Jesus tells his followers, “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set.... But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (1:7-8). To be sure, Jesus is urging those first Christians: “Don’t be in the business of limiting the grace and goodness of our God to any one group of people. Don’t be satisfied with old understandings; don’t make easy peace with business as usual. Instead, as you live and proclaim the faith, allow your hearts to grow, permit your vision to be sharpened, allow your perspective to be expanded. “Along the way”, says Jesus, “you will discover anew what it means to continue my work; you will grasp what it means to live and proclaim the new reality of life in the kingdom of God.”

Do you remember the escape of the Hebrews from Egyptian slavery, and their uncertainty about which direction to take in that escape?

With the pharaoh and all his chariots in hot pursuit, the Hebrews arrive at the banks of the Red Sea. They were exhausted. In front of them is nothing but the sea. Some begin to moan and complain bitterly to Moses that they should never have left on this suicide mission. It would have been better for them to have just remained in Egypt and let things as they were. Moses tried to console and reassure the people that they are going right and that deliverance was at hand. However, on the inside, he had his own doubts and wasn't sure where to turn next...Moses was in as much panic as the next Hebrew and in his anguished prayer to God, asks for direction...Then comes God's voice ringing above the noise, "Why do you cry out to me? Tell the people to go forward" ... Old Testament scholar, Renita Weems commented, "You can be sure that wherever the right place is, wherever the appointed place is, it is forward; it is one step ahead...where you can't see...it's out in the deep water. There, do you see?...Of course not. You won't see until you go".

Much like the ancient Hebrews who wondered if they should return to slavery in Egypt, the first Christians found themselves looking backward, yearning for the kingdom of Israel and its one-time glory. But Jesus compels them to look forward, even as he reminds them that they will hardly sense where they are going until they venture forth, until they take the risk of displaying new levels of compassion, new hunger for justice and peace, new heights of courage, while moving into uncharted territory - not only into Jerusalem and Judea, but also Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth. As Renita Weems continued in her article, she captures the very essence of Jesus' challenge when she wrote:

"Only when we risk getting lost do we find our way, and only when we stop trying to see our footsteps does our pathway become more certain. Encounters with God take place when we set out in a direction we hadn't planned to take and are willing to give up going where we intended."

Isn't this what Jesus had/has in mind when he encouraged those early believers - and us - to receive a new kind of power as the Holy Spirit comes upon us? The Spirit's power equips and enables us to continue the work of Jesus: deepening faith, proclaiming peace, embracing community, welcoming others, and serving our neighbor, in the compassionate spirit of Jesus. Surely this is what Jesus had/has in mind when he reminded those initial believers - and us - of our calling to be witnesses in Jerusalem and Hatfield, in Judea and Samaria, in our own state and nation, and even to the ends of the earth. Even now, Jesus invites us to take hold of a new perspective on power - the power of transformed living, the power of ever-increasing compassion and grace, the power of "continuing the work of Jesus" with wisdom and courage.

One of the handouts in a seminar I attended - I don't remember the leader's name - had this to say about courageous discipleship:

"Courage is the will to do what we see needs to be done. Courage is the will to invest our lives in others without requiring a guaranteed return. Courage is the will to pay the cost of compassion.... Courage takes us beyond the conventional, across borders to uncharted territory where nobody has a map for us, where there are risks, where the future is unknown, where we are willing to make ourselves vulnerable as persons and as a congregation in the mission of human liberation. Courage is hanging in there when it is so much easier to hang back and be cynical. Courage gives us the hope of transforming our own lives, of restoring the soul of our culture, of healing the wounds of the world, of humanizing the places in which we live."

Let us give thanks for the gift of the Holy Spirit, the One who strengthens us with a unique perspective, empowering us to continue the work of Jesus with courage and compassion and grace. Amen.