

What We Have to Give

Acts 3:1-10

April 26, 2020

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I

By my count, today marks the seventh Sunday of a new liturgical season that I've taken to calling the Season of Quarantide. Because of the ongoing public health emergency, it's been 49 days since we were last together as a congregation in this sanctuary. It's been 53 days since our three sons last sat in a classroom other than the one we've cobbled together at the kitchen table in our home. I don't know how many days it's been since they last had a haircut.

Thus far, our family has been so very fortunate during this crisis. We are all healthy and safe and we are relatively financially secure. I know there are others in our community who cannot say the same. I am trying to cultivate an attitude of gratitude and to be on the lookout for God's fingerprints as much as I can.

But I confess to you, my sisters and brothers, that for the first seven weeks of this crisis, I've been operating largely on adrenaline. But this week, I ran out of gas. This week, I hit the wall. This week, I've felt like I have nothing left in the tank.

II

And I suspect that I'm not the only one. Maybe you've already hit your wall and overcome it. Maybe you've still got some adrenaline left in your system. Maybe you're just more naturally optimistic and resilient.

But there is no denying that this public health emergency has already affected all seven billion people on this planet in both small and profound ways, and there is more yet to come. There is no denying that many, if not all of us, are being asked to dig down deep, to do more, to give more, to be more, and while we can count the days that have passed since this crisis began, there is no telling when or how it might end. Many, if not

all of us, might soon come to a point where it feels like our tanks have run dry, like we have absolutely nothing left to give.

III

And that brings us to our story from the Acts of the Apostles this morning. As Carol pointed out last week, the Book of Acts, or simply Acts for short, is really part 2 of the Gospel According to Luke. And last week, Carol walked us through the opening verses of Acts, wherein the resurrected Christ told his disciples to wait there in Jerusalem, and he promised that the power of the Holy Spirit would fall upon them and that thereafter, they would be his witnesses, beginning there in Jerusalem and then radiating out to the ends of the earth.

We're skipping over chapter two this morning, because we'll return to it in a few weeks when we mark the Festival of Pentecost. But between where Carol left off last week and where we pick up this week, Luke tells us that just as Jesus promised, the Holy Spirit did indeed fall upon the disciples, and they did indeed begin to become witnesses to the resurrected Christ out to the ends of the earth.

But before we turn our attention to our reading from Acts 3 today, I simply want to point out that all of these monumental events had happened in a relatively short period of time. Only about seven weeks had elapsed between Jesus being arrested in the garden, Peter standing in the courtyard of the high priest denying that he had ever known Jesus, the crucifixion, the resurrection, the ascension, and then the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the sending of the disciples into the world.

In just seven weeks, the disciples world had been completely turned upside down. In just seven weeks, everything they had known as "normal" had been completely redefined. And so I wonder if their heads weren't spinning just a little bit. I wonder if they had been operating on adrenaline for that period of time, and now they were starting to run out of gas. So with that background in mind, I invite you to listen for a Word from God from Acts 3:1-10.

One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o'clock in the afternoon. And a man lame from birth was being carried in. People would lay him daily at the gate of the temple called the Beautiful Gate so that he could

ask for alms from those entering the temple. When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked them for alms. Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, "Look at us." And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. But Peter said, "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk." And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. All the people saw him walking and praising God, and they recognized him as the one who used to sit and ask for alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple; and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

Peter and John were on their way to pray in the afternoon. Maybe it was out of habit or routine. Maybe it was out of need. Maybe they were full of energy and wanted to offer prayers of thanksgiving. Or maybe they were running out of gas and wanted to offer prayers of supplication. But in any case, when they came across the man born lame from birth lying there at the sanctuary door, what they told him was true. They had no silver or gold to give. At that point in time, the sum total of Christians in the world could have easily fit into this room. There were no mission budgets. There were no endowments that supported benevolence programs. Peter and John were still fishermen by trade, after all, and they had nothing you or I would describe as "discretionary income."

But they gave what they had – that is, they allowed the Holy Spirit to work in and through them in the name of Jesus the Christ. Luke makes it clear that it wasn't Peter and John that did the healing. This is the first healing story in Acts, and in every single one, the healing is always done in the name of Jesus Christ, by one of his followers who was willing to let the Holy Spirit work in and through them.

IV

And that, my friend, is good news, I think. Because you and I might be running out of gas. You and I might be tired, afraid, anxious, frustrated, or bored. You and I might have nothing left in the tank. And that's OK. Because the good news is that the work of the Holy Spirit does not depend on your silver or gold. The work of the Holy Spirit does not depend on your relative strength or weakness. The world already has a savior, and it's not you, and it's not me.

So please be gentle with yourself in these days, my friend. Remember, your job isn't to save the world. Your job is simply to be a witness – to testify to what you have seen and heard about Jesus of Nazareth – and to let the Holy Spirit flow through you and into others.

I don't know what that might look like for you this week. But here's something practical that one of my favorite teachers taught me. Take a deep breath in, and let it out slowly. Again, deep breath in, and let it out slowly. Now, as you breathe in, breathe in Christ's mercies. Remember, the Holy Spirit is often described as wind, as air, so breathe in deeply of Christ's mercies. And then, as you exhale, breathe out Christ's mercies to others. Breathe out Christ's mercies to the world.

Even the simple act of breathing these days is an act of testimony. The simple act of taking a moment, and instead of focusing your attention on the news and the chaos unfolding around you, to focus on the presence of the risen Christ. To breathe in his mercies, and to breathe them out to others. Even that is good and faithful work in these days, my friend.

I am convinced, my friend, that Jesus Christ is the last and best hope for the world. I am convinced, my friend, that Jesus Christ is the one in who all of human history and all of human destiny meet. I am convinced, my friend, that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ means that suffering and crying and mourning and pain and death are not the final things for us after all. Even when my tank is empty, even when I've got nothing of my own left to give, I've still got the good news about Jesus Christ, and so do you.

V

And so do we, who live out our discipleship in Christ in this thing we call the First Presbyterian Church of Athens, Georgia. So much of what we have come to know as "normal" about the life of the church has been disrupted in these days. These days, we have no in person worship services. These days, we have no in person Sunday School or choir rehearsals or youth groups or children's ministry or Wednesday night suppers or Weekday School or Family Promise host weeks or so many of the things that we have come to love and value about this particular congregation.

But we will always have the one thing that makes us the church, and not just another social club. We will always have the one thing that makes all the difference, in this life and in the life to come. We will always offer to Athens and to the world what we do have – the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth – the one who makes the blind to see, the one who makes the deaf to hear, the one who makes the lame to walk – the one who was crucified, who was raised, and who is coming again to make all things new.

And so remember, my friends, the church is not closed. The church has been deployed into a broken, hurting, and frightened world, a world that is in desperate need of what we have to give.

Thanks be to God. Amen.