

THE MESSAGE**April 11, 2010****Acts 1:1-11****The Rev. Dr. R. K. Miller***Be a Witness*

A missionary doctor in China tells the story of a farmer whose cataracts were so bad that he had lost his sight. Thanks to the careful work of this missionary doctor, the farmer's cataracts were removed and his sight was restored. Several days later that missionary doctor looked out his bamboo hut and saw something astounding. That same farmer was walking toward him. In his hand was one end of a long rope. He was using that rope to lead five other blind people to the doctor. They all knew that the farmer had been blind, but now he could see. He told them that the doctor had cured him, and naturally every one of those other blind people wanted to meet the doctor. The cured man couldn't explain the physiology of the eye or the technique of the operation. All he knew is that once he'd been blind, and now he could see. He wanted others to experience the same thing. (*From Holman New Testament Commentary: Acts by Kenneth O. Gangel.*)

That's how it is for us as Christians. We are blessed people because of Christ Jesus in our lives. We are forgiven people because of Christ Jesus in our lives. We are new life people because of Christ Jesus in our lives. We were blind but now we see because of Christ Jesus in our lives. Like that farmer, we naturally want to lead others to Jesus – telling others what Jesus has done for us on the cross -- even if we don't understand it or can't explain it. That's being a witness.

Today we begin a seven week series on the book of Acts. Most scholars believe the gospel writer Luke is also the author of Acts. I do too. Notice how Acts begins with the name "Theophilus" in verse one. It appears in Luke's gospel too. Theophilus literally means *God friend* or *friend of God*. This name appears nowhere else in the Bible only in Luke's gospel and in the Book of Acts. Luke's gospel tells the story of Jesus' life. The Book of Acts tells about life in the early church after Jesus resurrection -- a new way of life established by Jesus and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Acts offers us a road map to follow. The church is to be a vehicle to carry Jesus' mission into the world. That's what we learn from the Book of Acts. It reveals a church on the move doing what a church is supposed to do. Acts is the story of the birth and expansion of the early church through the work of the Holy Spirit. And it can teach us a few things about what it means to be the church today as guided by the Holy Spirit.

Our reading today picks up where Luke's Gospel leaves off. Jesus is raised from the dead. For 40 days after that, he teaches the disciples about the kingdom of God, and what life in the kingdom will look like. But apparently the disciples are stuck in the past – focused on the glory days of the past. They ask Jesus when he is going to restore the kingdom to Israel. They still think that Jesus' kingdom is an earthly kingdom, a kingdom of human power.

Jesus' answer is both disappointing and shocking. Jesus tells them that they don't need to worry about when or where. Instead, they need to focus on the mission that God has planned for them. Notice the very last thing Jesus says to his disciples before he ascended into heaven (verse 1:8), *"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*

There are three things about this biblical mission that's important for us to consider...

First, our mission is to be Spirit-powered.

The mission isn't dependent upon our traditions, or building, or our money, they have their proper place but the power that makes this mission happen is from the Holy Spirit. Those first disciples received the power of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost and their lives were changed. You and I received that power of the Holy Spirit in baptism and our lives are changed. The real power to carry out the mission God has planned for us does not come from us or what we already have; it comes from the Holy Spirit. I hope you can see that.

"Wait..." Jesus tells his disciples to wait for the Holy Spirit. We ought not do anything until we are guided and led by the Holy Spirit, until we have spent time reading the Bible and praying for spiritual guidance. Waiting is always the hardest part.

Second, our mission is to be a witness.

A witness is someone who testifies to what they have seen, or heard, or experienced, just like that farmer whose sight was restored. The farmer didn't know the details of what had happened to him. He just knew that he had been blind, but now he could see. That was his witness.

When it comes to being a disciple on mission for Jesus, what's your witness? What is God doing in your life? What does your faith mean to you? That's the basis for your witness.

That's what God is calling us to share with others. The Holy Spirit is already preparing the soil of people's hearts and lives. Our job is to plant the seeds of faith through our witness to others.

Third, our mission is to be glocal (global and local).

This is Jesus' idea. He said, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." It means we are called to be a witness wherever we live, or work, or play by the things we do and the things we say. Wherever we are, that's where we're called to share the faith; locally, nationally, or internationally.

These last words that Jesus said to his disciples are very important, they are his last will and testament to his disciples. According to Luke, as soon as Jesus finished giving these instructions, he left. He ascended into heaven.

We don't talk a lot about the Ascension. But in the early church it was a big celebration -- bigger than Christmas. Historians can date the Ascension celebration to as early as 68 AD -- Christmas wasn't celebrated until around 400 AD. So what does the Ascension mean for us and for the mission that God has given to us?

It means first and foremost that **Jesus' mission is *our* mission**. He is counting on us to continue what he started. By ascending into heaven, Jesus has passed on the baton of responsibility to his disciples -- to people like you and me -- to be about his kingdom work as witnesses.

If you don't see yourself as a witness, then you don't see yourself as God sees you. Think of it this way: *every member here at Friedens is a minister and every minister is a missionary*. Now there's a purpose statement to consider.

Second, the Ascension means that **Jesus now sits in a position of power**. Luke tells us that Jesus ascended in a cloud. In the Bible, a cloud is a symbol of God's glory. So Jesus ascended into God's glory and now rules and reigns from heaven. Our final destination.

Think of it this way, when it comes to accomplishing our mission on earth, we've got friends in high places! Our job – our calling in Christ is to be a witness, to tell the story of what God has done and is doing in our lives. And the Holy Spirit does the rest.

We are in mission together for Jesus' sake. So what does it look like? I was trying to think of an example of what this might look like and what this all means for us. I was having trouble coming up with something. Then God provided. When I walked into the office yesterday to get ready for the memorial service we had for Larry Keener I found a mailed envelope in my mail box from one of our members. Inside it had a hand written note that reads... (*reading from the note*)...

On a street I saw a small girl cold and shivering in a thin dress with little hope of a decent meal. I became angry and said to God: "Why did you permit this? Why don't you do something about it?" For a while God said nothing. That night he replied quite suddenly: "I certainly did do something about it – I made you." (It was signed and dated by the individual but to protect his privacy I have not revealed his name.)

Our mission is to be a witness in the world by making a loving difference in people's lives. Bringing hope where there is no hope. Bringing peace where there is no peace. Bringing forgiveness where there is no forgiveness. Bringing the love of God into the world wherever we happen to be.

We are not all called to be missionary doctors in China, but each one of us have gifts and talents and passions to be ministers and missionaries in our daily lives. What does that look like for you?

All around us are people who are lost, blind, broken, yearning to have someone like you and me share God's love with them. Jesus is counting on you and me – to be a witness. So be it! Amen!