

"CONTINUING THE WORK OF JESUS"

Acts 3:1-16

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York Center Church of the Brethren

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Last Sunday we heard the story of Pentecost in Walt Wiltschek's sermon, "Great Balls of Fire." It was indeed a day of wind and fire for the followers of Jesus. The Holy Spirit swept over them, and they were set on fire spiritually. Suddenly they were able to speak in languages from places where they had never been. Once tongue-tied, they were now eloquent in their witness to the Risen Christ. Once afraid to leave their hidden rooms for fear of the authorities, without warning, they became fear-*less*, courageously proclaiming the power of Christ in everything they said and in everything they did. They created a community that was so unusual in its love and care for others that it caught the attention of many people who wanted to be a part of it.

The infant church that was born in a cemetery at the empty tomb of Jesus on Easter morning, now takes a deep breath and expands through the intrusion and infusion of God's Holy Spirit on Pentecost. The confused, questioning, inept disciples who stumbled along with Jesus for three years are suddenly the master teachers and spiritual leaders of a new, unique community of faith. The Easter world now becomes a Pentecost world.

What does that mean for the disciples? Luke, the writer of the book of Acts, tells us: *"Day by day they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and caring for each other."*

We know this new world looks like community, caring, welcome, and inclusion- and in today's scripture text- we find that it also looks like healing. Luke shows us very clearly that Peter and John, bearing the name of Christ, are still truly Jews. They go to the Temple for prayers at 3:00 in the afternoon- as did all Jewish men.

When they enter the Temple compound, they see a man sitting near the gate. This man had been born lame and everyday his friends carried him to the gate by the entrance so he could beg for alms from those coming to worship. When the man sees them, he asks if they can spare a few coins. Luke tells us that both Peter and John look intently at this man. I think he wants us to know that they really see him. They are on an important mission- going to the Temple to pray- but they stop what they are doing, and they really look at him. They give him their undivided attention- just like Jesus used to do. Peter asked the man to look at them. Expecting to receive some spare change, he does. But Peter surprises him and says, "We don't have any money to give you, but I have something even better. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, I give you the ability to walk."

Peter took the man by the hand and helped him up and for the first time in his life, the lame man felt his ankles and legs grow strong. And not only did he walk, he jumped around, and entered the temple with them, "leaping and praising God."

You can imagine the reaction from the worshipers in the temple when this guy came bouncing in. They knew this man. They passed him every day when they went to pray. Many had probably given him money. Some had probably averted their eyes and walked around him, trying to ignore his need. And here he was, jumping up and down and praising God. Of course, they were filled with wonder and amazement. How did this happen?

Peter is more than happy to tell them how it happened. Right there- in the entrance to the temple, with the healed man hanging onto him, Peter launches into a sermon. He is a Jew preaching to Jews on their holy ground, the temple in Jerusalem.

Those gathered there think the healing is the main event, but Peter and John know that the healing is but a sign that points directly to the power of Jesus Christ. They know that the power of Jesus is the main event.

The crowd thought Peter and John were the miracle workers. After all, they are the ones who are standing there with the healed man. But Peter makes it clear that the one with the power to heal is one from their own tradition. He is the one they rejected and turned over to the Roman authorities for crucifixion. Peter tells them that the one who heals is none other than Jesus of Nazareth whom God raised from the dead. Even just speaking the name of Jesus has power to heal and this man, the one they know to be crippled, is living proof.

Peter tells them that this healer, Jesus, comes from the God they know, the God of Abraham, the God of their history and tradition, their God. And even though they rejected Jesus, it is not too late to repent and receive God's blessing.

It was quite a sermon and Peter hadn't even gotten to the "Amen" at the end before someone ran off and told the religious authorities. Before long, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees arrived. They confronted Peter and John and arrested them.

But the holy damage was already done and five thousand people who heard Peter's sermon became believers in Jesus Christ. And so begins a fresh unleashing of God's Spirit in the world. The Spirit brings with it the power of God and this power will bring healing to some, astonishment to many, and fury to those whose own limited power is threatened.

This new Pentecost world looks a great deal like the ministry of Jesus- there is healing, there is proclamation, and there is confrontation. In this new world we find joy and we

find fear; we find those celebrating abundant new life and those clinging tightly to the death-dealing ways of the old life.

Those who loved Jesus were certain that his story ended with his death on the cross. But it didn't. Then they thought his story ended when he ascended to heaven after his resurrection and they were left alone on earth. But it didn't. And now, as they are empowered with the breath of the Holy Spirit, they are finally realizing that Jesus's story has not ended at all- it continues - with them.

The whole book of Acts tells the stories of those who were part of the ongoing quest to discover, steward, and share the good news that through Jesus Christ God has changed the world. And that story does not end at the end of the book of Acts or even at the end of the whole Bible. That story continues today as we, the followers of Jesus Christ, continue to do his work.

Back in the early 90's, the Church of the Brethren General Board hired a company to help us find the words to express who we are as a denomination. Wendy McFadden, the publisher of Brethren Press, told the story in her publisher's letter in the December 2019 issue of "Messenger," our denominational magazine. This is what she wrote.

"This is the way it used to be: when someone asked about the Church of the Brethren, the answer was a halting, 'Well, we're a little like the Mennonites.' You tried not to say it, but out it came. But twenty-five years ago we received something new: "Continuing the work of Jesus: Peacefully. Simply. Together." After years of hand-me-downs, these words fit like a custom garment.

They were indeed our own. While they were 'uncovered' and arranged by the insightful people at a communication company, all the words were said by individuals at various gatherings across the church. They came from within ourselves.

These words were not intended to be a mission statement or a vision statement. They have simply helped us give voice to who we are. Though we Brethren are different shapes and sizes, we have somehow found this garment to fit us well." (1)

Even now, twenty-seven years later, we are still finding this tagline expressive of who we are as a denomination, or at least, who we want to be. We, here at York Center, have even incorporated the tagline into our own congregation's mission statement. "Continuing the work of Jesus. Peacefully. Simply. Together."

At the end of her letter, Wendy wrote, "What is the work of Jesus? It's healing and welcoming, saving and serving, going and discipling. It is love made visible."

Continuing the work of Jesus. That's a big claim to make, isn't it? First you have to know what the work of Jesus is. And then you have to be willing to claim his work as your work. Sometimes we are intimidated by the notion of doing the work of Jesus- after all, he was, well, Jesus. And we are certainly not. But as we see from the stories of the disciples, they

weren't Jesus either. They were much more like we are- imperfect, fallible human beings. They tried and they failed but they kept trying and when the power of the Holy Spirit came upon them, they changed the world.

I like the way Wendy said it. The work of Jesus is love made visible. That work includes the obvious- teaching, preaching, praying, healing, peacemaking. But it also includes the more hidden necessities- things that human beings need to thrive, work that includes- caring, feeding, building, hoping, comforting, listening, learning. We also know that Jesus did uncomfortable work like challenging, confronting, protesting, standing up for the weak and the powerless.

This is the work we are called to continue in this time and in this place. We are called to continue the work of love in whatever ways we can, within our own context, and with the strengths and weaknesses that only we possess. And don't forget -we are not expected to continue this work alone- we do it in partnership with the Risen Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit of God, and we do it together. That is the beauty of the faith community.

Like the variety of shapes of the pieces in a jigsaw puzzle, we all have different gifts, abilities, and talents. We all have different experiences and understandings. We all have our own unique relationship with Christ. When we put all of those differences together, though, we find that somehow, they fit and they form a picture of Jesus.

In our world today, we need the work of Jesus, we need love made visible, more than ever. As we emerge from our pandemic cocoons we can see the need in our world. This is not the time to "go back to normal," because our normal was not a good place for so many people. It is time to look around and then look ahead and see where God is leading us.

So, let's take a deep breath of that Holy Spirit, let's lace up our work boots, pull on our work gloves, and let's do what needs to be done. Together, in Christ's name. Let's DO SOMETHING! Amen.

(Closing video- "Do Something," by Matthew West)

End Notes:

- *Publisher's Letter by Wendy McFadden, December 2019 MESSENGER MAGAZINE.*