



“Silver and Gold Have I None, But...”

Acts 3

June 11, 2006

Last Sunday I brought a message to this year’s graduates. I preached from the Book of Acts, from the story of the Holy Spirit coming upon the believers on Pentecost Day. When the Spirit came upon those believers, the Spirit sent them out into the streets to tell of their experience with Jesus, and beyond the streets to Judea, and Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the world. I told the graduates that the Spirit now sends them out, sort of like computer viruses, to infect the information and power systems of the world, until the virus of the teachings of Christ cause the powers of the world come crashing down. It’s not every day you get to call someone a virus from the pulpit, but they let me get away with it.

What I did not tell them was that message was the first in a series of messages on the Book of Acts. From Pentecost until Advent, I will be preaching through the whole book. I’ve never done that before, but the time is ripe to do that with you. One of our Visions for this church by the year 2007 is that authentic and healthy evangelism will move to the forefront of our awareness, that outreach will become our key purpose, and that we will devote ourselves to that purpose here in this city.

The leaders of this church are still reeling from what one missions leader told us about our city: in Wilson there are 25,000 who are not in a church. We all just assumed, with a church on every corner around here, that our city is virtually saturated with believers. Not so. But just imagine: if some of those 25,000 people were to come to know Jesus and become his followers, how much better their lives would be now and forever!

So what should we do? Our first impulse would probably be to adopt some program or some other great plan and jump into it and work like crazy to spread the news of Jesus through Wilson. But, if you study what the believers in the Book of Acts did, they did nothing of the kind. In fact, those first believers did the opposite: they did nothing but wait. They waited and prayed for the Holy Spirit of God to come upon them, which it did on Pentecost. But even then that early church did not put together any master evangelism plan. The only plan they had was this: to keep up with the Holy Spirit of God, to follow the lead of the Spirit wherever it goes, to stay totally dependent on the guidance and the power of God’s Spirit. If you read Acts from beginning to end, you’ll find that was the plan -- the only plan. That makes my job here very simple from now until Advent. My aim is to tell you the story of how the church followed God’s Spirit, how the church became totally dependent and on the power of God.

As the church did this, they moved from a band of eleven trembling people hiding in an upper room to a swarm of brave believers spreading all over the world, even knocking on the gates of the capital of the Empire. My aim is, as we relive those great stories, that we will learn to follow the lead of the Spirit wherever it goes, and that we will become totally dependent on the Spirit's guidance and the power.

To be honest with you, if we learn how to do that, then we will be letting go of something this church has needed to let go of for a long time. We need to let go of our pride in our own strength and status as a major church in this small city. We have a lot of talented people here. We have a lot of resources. We feel pretty secure that we can handle most things pretty well. So we have followed our own lead and our own sense of self-sufficiency and done many good things. But we have come to depend on our own powers rather than the power of God. Could it be that there have been times when God has tried to lead us into something great, but because that quest seemed greater than even our considerable resources, we lost our nerve, and let the opportunity go?

What would happen among us if we learned to follow the lead of God's Spirit wherever it went? What if we traded our dependence on our own resources for dependence on the resources of God? I believe that can happen to us, if we let the stories of the Book of Acts soak into our hearts and minds. The book is often called "The Acts of the Apostles." An even better title would be "The Acts of the Holy Spirit," for God's Spirit is the main actor in this story. The believers have all they can do just to keep up with God. Just imagine: if our church were to try to keep up with God...

So, on with the story of Acts. Let me read to you what happened when two disciples on the way to worship met a beggar outside the sanctuary and followed God's lead. (Acts 3:1-10)

On the front of your bulletin, you can write down these three word pairs:

- 1) Request and Surprise
- 2) Wonder and Amazement
- 3) Turn and Trust

These three word pairs sum up what happened in chapter three as the followers of Jesus learned to follow the lead of God's Spirit.

FIRST: REQUEST AND SURPRISE

Peter and John were heading to the Temple for three o'clock prayers when something very ordinary happened to them: a beggar asked them for money. Actually, it's something ordinary right here at the corner of Nash and Park. Twenty percent of Wilson lives in poverty. Nearly ten percent of Wilson's workers have no job. So it's not unusual for us to see beggars.

But it's depressing, isn't it? Someone asks you for a dollar, and immediately you feel you have to calculate several variables to determine what to do. Is this person an addict? If I give him cash, would he just go across the street and buy a cheap bottle of Mogen David 20/20? Should I interview him and check his story? If I help him today, would it really change anything, or would he just be back in the same spot tomorrow? And then the setting here on this corner is a problem. They know I'm going into the church. They know I'm supposed to care about people.

Peter and John were in a similar situation. This beggar was right by a gate to the Temple. He knew that people who were trying to get right with God would feel obligated to be generous with someone in need. But even if Peter and John gave him money, it wouldn't change anything. The lame beggar would be right back there the next day. It was a depressing situation.

But something moved Peter to do something surprising: "I have no money at all, but I give you what I have..." All they had was a name. In the name of Jesus the Christ, Peter ordered him to get up and walk. Peter was so confident of the Name that he took the lame man by the hand and helped him up. In a depressing, everyday situation, *Something* led Peter to see a surprising possibility. That something was the Holy Spirit of God. Peter followed God's lead to offer the only thing he really had: the name of Christ.

And surprise, surprise -- that name was exactly what that man needed. He jumped up. He walked around and got his balance. And then he walked into the Temple, or rather he jumped into the Temple, praising the name that had made it possible: Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Peter had been willing to depend on that name. And so, a depressing request led to a thrilling surprise.

But that was not all, after request and surprise came WONDER AND AMAZEMENT. The scene widens from just Peter and John and the jumping man to the bystanders who were watching all this. The people were so awestruck that they ran toward the three. It's the same thing that happened on Pentecost: a sound like a whirlwind, followed by disciples able to speak the language of any people, followed by crowds wondering what was going on.

The same thing happens today. Every now and then, when the church manages to be the church, there is wonder and amazement. It's not news when the church acts like the rest of the world. When the church manages to do no more than protect itself, to look out for its own interests, people are not surprised. That's why so many tend to believe the dark view of the church in *The Da Vinci Code*. But let the church take a surprising initiative, let the church depend on the Spirit of God rather than on its own resources, let the church give itself away in service to humanity, and then miracles happen, and the world reacts with wonder and amazement.

This Thursday evening, our Church Council has asked me to convene a gathering of children's leaders and anyone who has a heart for our neighborhood and the children and families in it. Some of those children have been coming on our Wednesday nights.

For many churches in that situation, it would be tempting to do no more than protect themselves, to look out for their own interests. That would not be surprising. But I believe God's Holy Spirit is leading us to pray and let God lead us to take some surprising initiatives. Think of it: if we truly depended on God's Spirit to lead us into ministry in our neighborhood, what miracles might happen? Depression could give way to surprise and wonder and amazement. You're welcome to join me in praying and in thinking on this Thursday night.

Back to Peter and John and that lame man jumping into the Temple, and the crowd that gathered around them. After request and surprise, after wonder and amazement, came even more, namely TURN AND TRUST. Turn and trust was the message that Peter gave to the amazed crowd. The healing of the lame man had produced a crowd that was seeking an explanation for what was going on. And Peter gave them one:

This man is strong again by faith in the name of Jesus the Christ. God gave Jesus God's own glory, and then God gave Jesus to you. But you rejected him and killed him. Of all the people you could have killed, you killed the Son of God. But God raised him from the dead.

Now you have a second chance. Turn away from rejecting Jesus, and trust God. If you do trust God, your sins will be wiped out, and your life will be filled with times of refreshing. But if you keep rejecting Jesus, you will reject all the blessings that God gives through Him. (My paraphrase)

The crowd had seen the sign of Christ's grace in that man leaping into the Temple. Now the crowd needed someone to explain what it all meant. Turn and trust was the explanation and the proclamation that Peter gave to the crowd.

And that's what we are to say whenever anyone is amazed by the grace of Christ. Let's say we as the church have a good day one day, like Peter and John did. Let's say, we trust in the name of Jesus enough that we reach out in service and in healing to this city, and people's lives are changed, and the word spreads through the town as people wonder what in the world happened. That is the time when one of us, you or you, or me, or you, gets to step forward and say, "God did this. And it's a sign to turn to God and to trust God, so that your sins may be wiped out, and so that the times of refreshing may come in the name of Jesus.

That's what I'm talking about.

-- Douglas E. Murray