

Acts Conclusion; Advent Love

Let's begin with prayer, friends.

Prayer:

Introduction

We've walked through Acts for a year. And we've seen so much: We've seen Jesus nurture his disciples immediately after his resurrection; give them the mandate to be his witnesses throughout the world; promise them the long-held hope of the Holy Spirit coming upon them would happen soon; watch as it happens.

We've seen the first Apostles, those sent by Jesus, bear witness to him in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and further; watched as the early Church grew and gathered together, as its leaders and founders were persecuted and killed.

We've seen as Gentiles are brought into the People of God; watched as Peter advocated for them; watched as Paul was made an Apostle and we've walked with Paul from place to place, church to church, some of which he founded, some of which found him and

welcomed him.

We've seen Paul return to Jerusalem multiple times; seen the early Church struggle with racism and prejudice; watched as it became both Jewish and Gentile and seen the Gentile world grow through the work of Paul and the Antioch congregation.

We've seen Paul's life threatened over and over, miraculous escape after miraculous escape, and spent time laboriously waiting and re-hashing his story as he waited in Jerusalem for trial, finally ending up in Rome as God planned for him to.

We've seen the Holy Spirit act over and over and over, and seen that this book isn't just the Acts of the Apostles; it's the Acts of the Spirit.

Acts & God: God Keeps Promises:

So we've seen so much. And I don't know what we might take away from Acts except this: God keeps the promises God makes. Jesus, Lord and Messiah, keeps the promises Jesus makes. The Spirit acts; acted and acts now and will act again. God keeps promises.

All sorts of would-be kings, would-be powers, and

would-be idols exist in creation; and all of them are capricious: Reacting and acting-out in line with some impossible-to-understand internal inclination, a tilt of their will that we can never know. Luke tells us in Acts that God is not capricious, that God is not a would-be anything, apart from one who would be trusted by everyone if it could be arranged. God is one who keeps promises. God is who God has been.

Acts & God: God Is Not Capricious:

Jesus in Acts openly tells his disciples that there are things they ought to know and things they have no business knowing, because to know isn't for them. What Jesus never does is tell us that God is unknowable, ineffable, an all-powerful mystery, a black box from which no reasoning or purpose can be extrapolated. Rather, the disciples are invited do what God's People have always done, which the Church still does, which is to discover as they trust in God's character that God is trustworthy. They discover God is trustworthy as they trust in him. They discover that God does not withhold from them. This is important. God is the one who doesn't withhold anything God's People need to trust God.

Acts & God: Nothing New:

And there's nothing new in this: Long before the Spirit was given and the Spirit's Acts were written down by Luke, God said to Moses, "I will be who I will be." We've talked about this as we've walked through Exodus in our Adult Ed class. When Moses asks "Who should I say you are?" God says "I will be who I will be."

"I am who my actions will reveal I am. You will discover who I am by watching and experiencing what I do." God is putting everything out there. God's saying that the future will prove him out; God's behavior will call God out, so God's People would know what to call God. And again, this is a promise to not withhold anything from His People; it's a promise of a future, one in which they will discover, in God's giving, who God is.

Acts & God: In The End:

So at the end of Acts, what we know about God is what God's People have always known. God is who God has been; God will be who God will be. God is the one who we discover as we trust Him, just like Stephen, Peter, Barnabas, Mary, Priscilla and Aquila, Lydia, Luke, Paul, and so many others trusted Him and discovered Him. God keeps promises: to Israel, to those beyond Israel, to all humanity. The Spirit acts; acted and acts now

and will act, because God will be who God will be, and what Acts tells us is that God will be for far more people than anyone in Israel ever really imagined. God will give, and not withhold, far more than Israel ever expected God to give.

But to talk about the end of Acts at the end of Advent means we have to talk about not only this God who doesn't withhold Himself but reveals Himself, but also Love. It's the week where we talk about that highest virtue, best gift, greatest mercy: "love." So it just makes sense to talk about love in Acts.

Acts & Love: No "love!"

But if we tried to find "love" in Acts, what we'd realize is that it never shows up. At least...the word doesn't. In one place a derivative of the greek verb "to love" shows up, and there, only as an adjective. It's used by the Jerusalem Council to describe Paul and Barnabas in the letter they send out to the new Gentile congregations. You can translate it as "beloved," or "dearly loved" although the NIV just calls these two our "dear friends," here. and the adjective itself can be simply translated as "unique" instead of, say, "beloved." If you were doing a loose translation you could roll with "precious" or "special." Inimitable!

That's it. That's where "love"--at least, the word in Greek--almost shows up in Acts.

Acts & Love: No "love?"

But we've walked through the book of Acts, and we wouldn't say, I think, that there's no love in the book, right? We wouldn't say it's a book without love in it.

Remember how the early Church acted? We read in Acts 2:

42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. 44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. 46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

They gave and forgave, they sheltered those who needed shelter, welcomed strangers, broke down every economic and societal boundary that could be broken, turning the world upside down, their enemies said, in order to care for those who needed cared for.

Acts & Love: Love All Over

We realize that Acts is full of love. Acts is full of love, even if the word for it never shows up. Love is all over Acts, proven in the actions and choices of those who express it. Proven in this kind of “devotion,” these “every day” habits that the earliest Church felt were their mandate. It’s revealed in all the ways the Church gives and gives and gives, and doesn’t withhold their time, treasure, or talent--their space, their warmth, their advocacy--from one another. In Acts, what love looks like is people selflessly giving to those who need it. In Acts, to love is to reject withholding what others need. In Acts, to love is to reject withholding what others need. Love, in Acts, is not withholding what others need from you.

God & Love & Acts:

And this makes sense. God is, as John says, “love.” God is the one who doesn’t withhold from creation

what creation needs; doesn't withhold from God's People what they need. God is the one who offers the Spirit who acts in Acts: sustaining and guiding and helping God's People and those around them.

It makes sense for the Church in Acts, led by the Spirit, to love as God loves, do as God does. These people, Gentile and Jewish, have come to trust that Jesus really is "the image of the invisible God," as Paul puts it. Jesus is the one who reveals who God is. And Jesus, of course, is famously giving, refuses to withhold himself. He tells his followers, "the greatest love is shown when a person lays down his life for his friends" (TLB). In case they haven't yet heard, Paul will tell the same truth to the church he founded at Philippi, writing them a letter while under arrest. He pleads,

1If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, 2then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. 3Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. 4Each of you should look not only to

your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

5Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

***6Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God
something to be grasped,***

***7but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.***

***8And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death—
even death on a cross!***

We'll pull this passage out when we want to talk about humility; which is fitting, because it talks about humility. Jesus' humility, which we're supposed to emulate. But basic to this passage is the way Jesus ultimately is turned not toward himself, but toward us, toward "the other." Jesus offers himself, doesn't withhold himself, to those of us who need him.

This was the love practiced by the earliest Church as they took on the character and behavior of Jesus, who himself revealed the character and behavior of a God

who didn't withhold anything from a Creation that needed redeemed.

Love, as far as Acts and the life of God reveals it, is giving ourselves, not withholding from those who need us. Love is the name for what the Church does when we act like Christ who revealed God, and don't withhold from others what they need. We are the ones who will be who we will be, ones whose character is tested by the future, and who are known by the company we keep, because it's to those others that we give ourselves.

Caveats: Sure.

Are there caveats to this? Are there times when withholding may be good and right? Sure. And evil can twist even our selflessness to its own ends. We could just as easily say that love is a withholding of ourselves from that which harms and hurts and dehumanizes. We're meant to be surrounded by others who have the Spirit acting in their lives, and who will speak to us when we stray into behavior that isn't loving at all, but dangerous for our integrity, health, and spirit. But lets avoid the caveats and say this about today, risking simplicity:

Conclusion:

In Acts the church discovers who God has been all along, and they trust that God will keep being who God has been. For some of them this is brand new; for others, it is brand renewal; a new discovery of who God truly is. In Acts the Spirit reveals to Gentiles and Jewish People both that all kinds of People can now become the People of God, if only they trust the Messiah and Lord who didn't withhold anything from anyone, but gave all of himself for all of creation. And what we see, over and over in Acts, is the Church taking this same posture of giving, of not withholding what others need, but providing for them. And that's love, as far as Acts goes, without ever having to say the word. It's what God's People were made for, made to do: Reveal God's love, give and not withhold, for the good of all.

This is a season of things being asked of us, of needs being needed and wants being wanted, and each of us is continually being asked to give and not withhold right now. It's a time when all our avoidance strategies somehow--and blessedly--erode, and the needs are revealed all around us.

Can we love? Will we withhold from those who have

need of us, or need us? What have we taken from others, and what do we need from the God who continually, continually gives to us? Our greatest miracle is that we always, continually take God's giving for granted, and expect God to withhold nothing from us. And God, who is love, gives us what we need. Let's do the same all around.