

A Patchwork Church
Acts 1:1-11; Luke 24:44-53
Seventh Sunday of Easter/Ascension Sunday (June 1) 2025
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Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing from a Nazi prison, said, “The time of words is over...”

Bonhoeffer believed the church in Nazi Germany had so compromised itself in the interest of power and nationalism that it no longer had anything to say. They no longer had any integrity that allowed them to speak... “The time of words is over.” It was true in 1944 and it is true in 2025.

Bonhoeffer went on to finish his thought by saying, “Our being a Christian today will be limited to two things: prayer and righteous action.”

Prayer and righteous action. Action which is right; action which is just. The just thing. The right thing. Pray and do the right thing.

Interestingly enough, in our text today from the first chapter of Acts, Jesus tells the disciples much the same thing. Before you go out and say anything, you’d better have something to say and make sure it’s rooted and shaped by the Holy Spirit. And before you go out and do anything, you need to know what to do and how to do it. If you seek the right and just action, make sure it is right and just according to the standards of the Living Christ. So, Jesus says go and wait. Wait (Acts 1:4). Acts says a little further that they waited and prayed – wait and pray and pray and wait. Get yourself ready. Get centered, rooted, prepared because the

promised Holy Spirit is coming. Theologian Willie Jennings comments that from this first chapter of Acts until the last chapter, everything thing the disciples say and everything they do, no matter how mundane, is done in waiting and prayer (*Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible – Acts*, Willie James Jennings, pp. 36-37).

The book of Luke and the book of Acts are seasons 1 and 2 of the same story of the Living God invading this system of Death and Domination to bring about a new Way of Life and Light, healing and hope. Luke is season 1 of the story, which ends with Jesus' final instructions and then his ascension to heaven. Acts is season 2 of the story, and it begins with a recap of the previous episode from season 1, told a little differently.

So here the disciples are gathered around Jesus out on the edge of Jerusalem while he gives his last instructions telling them to wait and pray. Right off, the first thing the disciples ask Jesus shows us how much work is yet to be done by the coming Holy Spirit. The disciples ask, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" (1:6). "Is now the time when you take control and rule? Is now the time for us to seize power? We've been waiting for this since the time of King David. Now, we're ready for you to make Israel great again."

This is the "nationalist question: When will we rule again?" Willie Jennings says that no doubt they asked this question with the assumption that their rule would be for the good of the world and the good of the people. And he goes on to say that nationalism is and has been a chronic temptation of the Christian church and the people of God, especially whenever we think we've got some power. Now we can do some good, Jesus. Let's get to work making Israel great again (*Acts*,

p.17). Let's get the power to rule and take over so we can do some good. – but remember that “good” is defined in nationalistic terms.

For Christian Nationalism part of the assumption is that it is nation/state that will bring about God's will. Not the church. Furthermore, the nation/state is to become the kingdom of God, so everything is done with that as the end goal. Do away with public schools and have only private schools that teach a nationalistically curated curriculum. Do away with all Diversity/Equality/Inclusivity programs so Whites Only becomes the dominant policy of every campus, every college, every corporation, and everything else.

Jennings says that this temptation of nationalism is understandable among people who have been beaten down, left out, and who feel marginalized. He says that the more people feel wounded, the greater the fantasy of getting power and setting things right, and even getting revenge. “It drives the creation of walled communities, border patrols, la migra, and checkpoints and turns violence and segregation into the proper exercise of the state's right to life” (*Acts*, p. 17).

He says that nationalism says that it is proper for the people of a nation-state to be of one single dominating ethnicity or race. Nationalism assumes zero-sum calculations, everything is win/lose where we win by controlling our borders and/or controlling our identities, or we lose by being over-run with immigrants who confuse identities and resist assimilation (p. 21).

Nationalism is a drive to have the power to impose a kind of order and underlying any such imposed order is the use or threat of violence. It is why guns are so much a part of American White Christian Nationalism.

So back here in the very first chapter of Acts, the disciples mean well, but they're assuming a completely different understanding of the work of Jesus Christ and what will become the church. They are confused about their definition of goodness in contrast to Jesus' definition of goodness. The entire book of Acts is about the struggle, the pain and conflict and disagreement, these disciples undergo as they are converted, changed, and transformed from a nationalistic perspective to a Jesus perspective.

First off, remember Jesus tells them to go wait. To wait, means give up power and give up control. Let it go. It's about patience, and patience helps deal with anger. Hear me clearly, there are things we should be angry about! Anger is a motivator and should get us up each day determined we're going to do something about gun violence and injustice and anti-immigrant racism. But part of waiting and prayer is learning how to direct our anger in the right and just way and not allowing anger to turn us into part of the problem. Anger must work hand in hand with patience.

And patience works hand in hand with hope. Not hope in nationalism and not hope in "Making America Great Again." Not hope we can control the outcome, no matter how good we think our outcome might be. Our hope is in the Living God known in Jesus Christ, who shows us another way. So we wait and hope for the coming of God's Holy Spirit, who will not only empower us but will guide us and change us.

Secondly, notice that Jesus tells them they will be his "witnesses" (Luke 24:48; Acts 1:8). To be a witness of Jesus Christ means to speak out and speak up and live and embody the Way of Jesus, and then let the chips

fall where they may. We do not control the outcome. We do not coerce people. We do not use force, guns, big money, or yell and bully. We do not manipulate or propagandize. We say and do the gospel and let it go, trusting the Holy Spirit is at work.

We are witnesses. And we can be good and faithful witnesses or bad and unfaithful witnesses.

Furthermore, Jesus says we are to be his witnesses to all nations in Luke 24:47 and in Acts Jesus says, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). All nations, the ends of the earth. In other words, not one nation. The mission of the church is to cross borders, cross national boundaries and wherever and whatever divides people from God and from each other, proclaiming the gospel that in Christ is the love that unites and heals and repairs, and makes all things new.

Willie Jennings writes: *The love of God exposes our modern nations for what they are – simple fabricated containers for the rich multiplicity of peoples who each and every one are beloved creatures of the Creator God. The disciples of Jesus are called to reach into this rich multiplicity (Luke 24:47) and like quilters joining beautiful fragments of cloth, invite a weaving together of peoples within nations and beyond them as well. (Acts, p. 22).*

Instead of being covered over by someone's controlling sameness and uniformity, instead of American Whiteness, the church of Jesus Christ is a different image. Like a patchwork quilt, we are pieced together by love.

Anne Tyler writes in her 1998 novel *A Patchwork Planet* of an elderly woman, Mrs. Alford, working on a quilt for what seemed like years. Finally, the narrator gets to see it and says, *I'd heard about that planet quilt often, but I'd never seen it. What I had pictured was a kind of fabric map – a plaid Canada, a gingham U.S. Instead, the circle was made up of mismatched squares of cloth no bigger than postage stamps, joined by the uneven black stitches of a woman whose eyesight was failing. Planet Earth, in Mrs. Alford's version, was makeshift and hap-hazard, clumsily, cobbled together, overlapping, and crowded and likely to fall into pieces at any moment* (p. 261).

That's the church. That's us. By the standards of a White Nationalistic church, we're haphazard and clumsily cobbled together, all different colors, and even different kinds of cloths, overlapping and crowded which might fall to pieces at any moment. But by the standards of Jesus, we're the very people God loves working with, partly because we're under no illusions that we're in charge. We know we're not. We hope and pray God is!

It is why you see the large quilt hanging at the end of the hallway. That quilt is made up of different pieces of cloth from you. Each piece is from an item of clothing from Austin Heights' members, all pieced together with a golden thread running through it holding it together. That quilt reminds us of who we are: a patchwork church stitched together and held together by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus says we are to wait and pray. Wait and pray and power will come to us. And you and I both know that we're going to need all the power of the Resurrected Christ through Holy Spirit we can get.

Our friend, Ryon Price, the pastor of Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth, reminds me that the word "resurrection" originally meant "uprising" in the ancient world.

The Resurrection of Christ is an uprising of Life and Light in the middle of the systems of Death and Darkness. We are witnesses of that uprising. And while we are scared and mad and overwhelmed, by the patient work of the Holy Spirit, God uses us to lovingly piece together all sorts of people with one another, bringing healing and repair, hope and wholeness.

Let it be so.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.