

Well, the holidays are behind us. Many of you had the opportunity to go back home and visit family and friends. It was a chance for some of you to return to where you grew up and see the old home place and renew old acquaintances. As I thought about this, I remembered the old Methodist Church that I grew up in. It is no longer there, having been torn down years ago when they built a new one. It didn't have air conditioning so we would open all the windows and doors in the summer and hope for a good breeze. We had funeral fans to cool ourselves, to swat the wasps that flew around, and to make sure that everybody stayed awake during the sermon.

Our family roots are as important as are our religious roots. I have often thought that we as a church need to return to our roots. I firmly believe that if this church or any church is going to grow and truly serve the Lord then we need to go back to the characteristics of the Early Church. I have preached on these characteristics as recorded in the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles several times since I was appointed here. But we also need to return to the heritage of the Methodist Church, especially during in the early days of our country. During those early years, the Methodist Church was the largest and fastest growing church. Some of the reasons for this growth were the circuit riding preachers, open communion and camp meetings. When the preacher came around every 3 to 4 months, people would literally camp out, setting up tents and campfires. There would be old time gospel songs, long-winded prayers and hell-fire preaching.

Now I truly believe that we can recapture the spirit of the Early Church and the camp meetings if we are willing to make the effort and follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit. So, this morning I want us to look at one way that we can start doing this. Our scripture text is taken from the first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, the first eleven verses.

Read Acts 1:1-11

Acts was written by the Apostle Luke as a sequel to his gospel account. These two books are linked by the appearance of Jesus to His disciples following His resurrection and His ascension back into heaven forty days later. The Gospel of Luke is a record of Jesus' life and ministry here on earth, from His birth to His ascension. Acts, which was written as the second volume, is the story of the Christian Church which continues to be written to this day; it really has no ending. In essence, we are writing a chapter everyday right here at High Desert.

Listen to the first two verses again: "In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day that He was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles He had chosen." Did you catch the key point here? The work that Jesus began to do; in other words, the work Jesus began continues at the time Luke

wrote this letter through the efforts of the apostles with the help of the Holy Spirit. And it continues today my friends in the work that we should be doing here as a church. Jesus started it and it is not complete until He returns in final victory. Until that day, we who call ourselves Christians are to continue the ministry that Jesus started.

The Book of Acts clearly demonstrates that the ministry of Jesus Christ continues through the witness and actions of His Church. Dr. John Foster tells how an inquirer from Hinduism came to Christianity in India. Without any assistance, the man had read the entire New Testament. The story fascinated him and Jesus touched his heart. As he read the stories of Jesus and the Early Church, he felt that he was entering a new world. In the gospels, he read about Jesus, His works and His suffering. Then in the Book of Acts, he read about how the disciples had taken up the work of Jesus. The Church continued where Jesus left off at His death and resurrection. So, the man decided that he too must belong to such a Church that carries on the ministry of Jesus Christ. This is what the Church is all about, carrying on the work of Jesus Christ that our ancestors began; the work begun at Pentecost.

In the fourth verse, Jesus tells the apostles to wait in Jerusalem until they receive the indwelling of the Holy Spirit which occurred at Pentecost which we will celebrate in May. They were told to wait; sometimes we tend to get ahead of God while pursuing our own personal agendas. Jesus is telling us that the Holy Spirit is here to guide and direct us, to make sure we continue the work that He began, and not our own.

Unfortunately, there are many churches and people today who have taken this command too far; they are still waiting after over 2,000 years. They have gotten complacent and become too comfortable assuming the role of spectators; thus, the Spirit couldn't move them with a stick of dynamite. We must remember that just because Jesus went back to heaven His ministry did not stop; there is still much work to be done.

Listen again to the eighth verse: "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." After saying this Jesus ascended back into heaven to sit at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. His last words on earth were "you are my witnesses."

We hear a lot about witnesses in legal proceedings. Some of us have even been called as a witness in a legal case. A witness is someone who is willing to testify based on their personal knowledge. As Christians who have accepted Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, we are called to testify about who Jesus is to us, what our relationship with Him means to us, and what He has done for us. D. T. Niles gave an excellent definition of witnessing when he said that it was "one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread, the Bread of Life, Jesus Christ."

I hope that you caught the key words in this definition of a witness: personal knowledge. In order to testify about who Jesus is we must know Him personally; have a personal relationship with Him. Now I am not talking about some book knowledge; how much you know about the Bible or how many jeopardy questions you can answer. I mean personal knowledge and experience which comes from the heart and not the mind; it comes from a personal relationship, such as the one that you have with your spouse or best friend. The *Message* paraphrases 1 John 1:3 as follows: "We saw it, we heard it, and now we're telling you so you can experience it along with us." Witnessing is telling something that comes from our own experience, something that we know personally to be true. Witnessing is sharing with others what Jesus has done and is doing in our lives.

Let me interject a question right here – if you were called to testify on behalf of Jesus Christ this morning, would you be able to do so; would your testimony have any credibility; do you know Jesus well enough to be called as one of His witnesses? This is something that each of us needs to seriously ponder, and hopefully we can all say: "Yes, I am more than willing to testify for my friend Jesus." Because one of these days the roles will be reversed, and Jesus will be called upon to testify for us as to our place in eternity. Will He know us personally or will we be a stranger to Him? On Judgment Day when your name is called, you don't want to hear Jesus say: "I don't know him or her."

Now of course, our witnessing is not in a court of law, but in everyday life. We witness when we tell others about what Jesus has done in our lives and what our relationship with Him means to us. But we also witness by how we live our daily lives, by our words and our actions. I had an interesting discussion once with a man on the proper approach to bringing someone to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. He favored the more direct approach; that is, going right up to the person and asking them if they had been saved. Now while this approach may have brought a few souls to Jesus Christ, I believe that it has turned many more potential believers sour on Jesus and the Church.

To me you must first establish a relationship with the other person; gain their trust. And you gain their trust by living as Jesus intended us to live; in other words, becoming a "Living Bible." Some people will never read the Bible, but they will watch those who they know to be Christians to see how they react to life. When they see how you handle the problems that life throws your way, and the peace and joy that exist even in those trying circumstances, they will be curious and become open to discussing Christianity and who Jesus is. Remember what Jesus told the apostles, wait for the Spirit. When the time is right you will feel the urging of the Spirit to discuss your faith with the other person.

The key is reflecting Jesus Christ in our daily actions and words so that others will know that we are Christians. Will Rogers said that we should live so that we would not be ashamed to sell the

family parrot to the town gossip. Or as someone else said, we should live so that the preacher will not have to lie at our funeral. I like the approach of St. Francis of Assisi who said: "Preach the Gospel at all times; when necessary use words." It is not so much a matter of words as it is of actions. I truly believe that there is a hunger and thirst for God in the heart of everybody we meet, and by showing Christ to others by how we live, we provide the opportunity for this thirst to be quenched.

John D. Rockefeller, Sr., played golf each week with a friend who was in the insurance business. One day his friend heard through the grapevine that Rockefeller had taken out a \$10 million dollar life insurance policy. The next week when they played golf the man asked Rockefeller why he didn't let him write the insurance policy for him. To which Rockefeller replied: "Why didn't you ask me?" Many people never become Christians simply because good people like you and me who know Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior simply fail to tell a lost friend about Jesus. You know we tell our friends about our favorite restaurant, movie, where to shop or our last trip, but we never tell them about our Lord and our church. Why not? A bumper sticker said: "Friends never let friends die without Jesus!"

Finally, Jesus told the apostles that they were to be His witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Where have we heard this before? In the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20 where Jesus said: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." Did you hear that? Jesus said go; the waiting is over; the Spirit is here and ready to move out. Jesus is calling us to go into the world and share the His Good News with everyone we meet.

John Wesley was an Anglican priest in England, but when he started promoting the beliefs that we now share as Methodists, most Anglican churches refused to let him in the pulpit, so he preached outdoors. On one occasion when they refused to let him preach in the church that his father had served for decades, he went outside and preached on his father's grave. He said that the world was his parish. Did you hear that – the world is our parish? Our witness is not restricted to inside these walls. Look around you; Rio Rancho is our mission field; San Fidel and Gallup are our mission field; the International Zone and all of New Mexico is our mission field. This is where God is calling us to share the Good News by our words and our actions.

Those of us who grew up in the 1970s probably remember the classic Christian folksong "Pass It On" that we will sing in a minute. The last verse expresses a passion that we must never lose: "I'll shout it from the mountaintop; I want my world to know; the Lord of love has come to me; and I want to pass it on." Look around you; this is our parish. There are people all around us who are searching for the answer of life; searching for peace and joy in their daily life and we

have the answer. He is Jesus Christ and He wants us to share our love for Him with all we meet each day.

You may never know the impact that your sharing may have on another person. Last Sunday many of you were unable to get to church due to the snowstorm. It reminded me of a snowstorm I heard about in 1856 in Colchester, England. The storm was so bad that only a few people showed up at the Primitive Methodist Church. A teenager sought shelter in the church from the cold. The pastor was not able to get there, so one of the lay members delivered the message from Isaiah 45:22 – “Look to me and be saved.” He did the best he could. At end of his message, he looked straight at the young man and said: “Young man, look to Jesus.” The young man accepted Jesus and went on to become one of the greatest preachers in England, Charles Spurgeon. You never know how you may influence another’s place in eternity.

Think about that one person you know who God has been urging you to invite to church or to share your faith with. We all have at least one and most likely more. Over the next few months, answer God’s call to go and share the love of Jesus Christ with them, and then bring them to church. In addition, we have a great opportunity with Easter in several weeks; invite your friends and neighbors. The Book of Acts is being written each day by those who love Jesus. What will you write today? Amen